

Uoldelul Chelati Dirar
Karin Pallaver *Editors*

Africa as Method

A Handbook of Sources and
Epistemologies

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Editors

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A Handbook of Sources and Epistemologies

Editors

Uoldelul Chelati Dirar
University of Macerata
Macerata, Italy

Karin Pallaver
Department of History and Cultures
University of Bologna
Bologna, Italy

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To Irma Taddia



Professor Irma Taddia, Salt Lake City, 2009. *Picture by*
Tommaso Centeleghe

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Contributors

Alessandro Bausi Sapienza Università di Roma, Rome, Italy

Lars Folke Berge Dalarna University, Falun, Sweden

Silvia Bruzzi University of Turin, Turin, Italy

Bianca Maria Carcangiu University of Cagliari, Cagliari, Italy

Lee Cassanelli University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, USA

Uoldelul Chelati Dirar University of Macerata, Macerata, Italy

Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch The University of Paris, Paris, France

Federico Cresti University of Catania, Catania, Italy

Federica Guazzini Università per Stranieri di Perugia, Perugia, Italy

Torsten Hylén Dalarna University, Falun, Sweden

Gianfrancesco Lusini Università di Napoli L'Orientale, Naples, Italy

Jonathan Miran Western Washington University, Bellingham, WA, USA

Judith Narrowe Dalarna University, Falun, Sweden

Tekeste Negash Dalarna University, Falun, Sweden

Karin Pallaver University of Bologna, Bologna, Italy

Elena Vezzadini Institute des Mondes Africains, CNRS, Paris, France

Awet T. Weldemichael Queen's University, Kingston, Canada

Massimo Zaccaria Pavia University, Pavia, Italy

Introduction



Karin Pallaver and Uoldelul Chelati Dirar

Africa as Method is an examination of how scholars approach the study of Africa, specifically in terms of locating, choosing, interpreting, and combining sources to reconstruct Africa's history. This topic is not new, as the development of new research methodologies and the strong interdisciplinary nature of the discipline, have generated ongoing debate and reflection.¹

The discipline of African history developed in the 1960s as part of area studies, which aimed to produce historical knowledge about regions of the world that had been largely overlooked by historians. In addition to this, area studies offered a fresh perspective that challenged the paradigms of Western historiography and presented new models of interpretation. In the case of African history, this meant examining and valuing “African agency”, which refers to the ability of Africans to shape their own history and explore new approaches to sources. The field of historical research on Africa emerged simultaneously in Western and African universities. In African universities, there was a strong political imperative to replace the colonial mindset that had dominated historiography with national histories. This was crucial for the nation-building process in newly independent African states, as it involved filling the boundaries imposed by colonialism with a shared historical past that would form the basis of a new national identity (Denon & Kuper, 1970: 277; Afigbo, 1975; Thioub, 2007). In the 1960s and 1970s, colonialism was often considered just an “episode” in African history (Ajayi, 1969), with historians primarily focused on the pre-colonial era as a means of highlighting the existence of an authentic African history. On the other hand, colonialism itself was not extensively studied, except when examining

¹ See among the most recent ones: Falola and Jennings (2003); Spear (2019) and Jacobs (2014).

K. Pallaver (✉)
University of Bologna, Bologna, Italy
e-mail: karin.pallaver@unibo.it

U. C. Dirar
University of Macerata, Macerata, Italy

anticolonial movements that underscored the active role of Africans in shaping their own history. Key themes during this period included state formation and pre-colonial trade, known as the “trade and politics” pair. Studies such as Dike’s *Trade and Politics in the Niger Delta* (1956) marked a watershed in Africanist historiography because they overturned two cornerstones of the Eurocentric and denialist approach to African history that characterized Western historiography in those years. First, it placed itself in the realm of African history rather than imperial history. At the same time, despite his militant and passionate defence of oral sources, Dike based his book on written sources, mostly colonial archives. In doing so, he showed that, once read through different lenses and with a mutated methodological approach, written sources could open up new perspectives and a different appreciation of the African past.

This allowed for dialogue with historians from other regions, expanding the boundaries of the canon and engaging in a fruitful and equal exchange with Western historiography. This was, after all, a struggle against an exoticist view of Africa, which nevertheless carried with it, at least in this initial period, the danger of the continent’s historical distinctiveness being set aside (Eckert, 2003: 257). Recognizing Africa’s internal analytical coherence and the need to depart from European historiography was a fundamental principle for the discipline of African history and area studies as a whole. In the context of recognizing the unique history of the continent, the field of African studies emerged by proposing new research methodologies to reconstruct the history of societies with limited written sources. These methodologies include archaeology, historical linguistics, anthropology, and, most importantly, oral history. One of the most significant contributions of Africanist historiography was the recognition of oral sources as “legitimate” sources, as demonstrated by Jan Vansina in his influential book, *De la tradition orale: essai de méthode historique* (1961). Vansina provided a detailed methodology for employing oral sources, which allowed Africanist historians to shift the perspective from the history of European colonizers in Africa to the history of Africans themselves.

In the ecstatic and militant frenzy of the 1960s, the universities lent themselves to serving as the forge of the emerging nation, and historiography was the privileged tool in this process. After the excitement of independence, however, the brutal contradictions of power and the non-inclusive nature of the new national narratives became increasingly stark, forcing scholars to revise their positions and embark on a long and complex process of critically reviewing the epistemological foundations of their research. Notions of authenticity and historical continuity have been questioned and scholars have debated on what to do next seeking for new epistemological foundations to their researches in order to provide urgently needed answers to the dramatically deteriorated African political landscape. Political fragmentation, internecine struggle, and the shameful collapse of modernization projects disrupted narratives of a progressive destiny of African states and their societies and called for new epistemological perspectives. The debate on these issues has intensified especially since the 1990s, a probable side-effect of the end of the Cold War and its disruptive effect on African political processes and geopolitical alignments consolidated under that system. Theories of modernization, development and the nature of the African state began to be questioned. Scholars such as Chabal (1992) and

Bayart (1993) denounced the failure of the modernization theory and condemned the African state as kleptocratic, rooted in political predation, and driven by insatiable greed. This critique, while accurate in exposing the brutality and failures of many African states, went somewhat astray in that it failed to effectively historicize these processes, flattening their trajectories in an unnuanced account. On the same themes, Mamdani (1996) offered an equally provocative but historically more articulated analytical framework. He challenged the tendencies in Western social theory to frame its discourse on Africa in terms of absence (lack of history, development, civilization, etc.), suggesting that Africa should simply follow the steps of previous experiences of Western development. On the contrary, Mamdani proposed to bring African agency to the fore, grounding it in a nuanced analysis of the weight of historical processes. He began by dissecting the multiple legacies of colonialism, with particular emphasis on what he saw as a central feature of colonial power: the “bifurcated state”. According to Mamdani, the historical method shows that colonial administrations in Africa were torn by the tension between the urban space (originally planned for European settlers) and the rural areas which were administered along notions of ethnic division and retribalized authority, which entailed a distorted use of traditions to bolster alien rule.

In the same years, a parallel interdisciplinary debate has developed around the epistemological foundations of African studies. A central role in this process was played by Mudimbe’s (1988, 1994) reflections on the conceptual and methodological foundations of the discourse on Africa. With a particular focus on philosophy and anthropology, which inevitably reflects on history, he argues that the European structure of knowledge is deeply and systemically ethnocentric and that this has deeply flawed the approach to the study of African societies and cultures. Mudimbe further suggests that in order to maintain and justify this hegemony and power, the West invented an image of Africa as “primitive”, creating a sharp dichotomy that implied the superiority of Europe over Africa. Mudimbe suggests that this approach has produced an epistemological framework that has also been adopted by many African scholars, who have thus framed politics and discourses of otherness and ideologies of alterity along the same conceptual lines, the *Négritude* movements being a case in point. Mudimbe’s contribution to the field of African studies has been enormous in that he has deconstructed the politics of otherness, forcing scholars to rethink both their social role within their communities (Diouf, 2000) and the epistemological foundations of their research, with a particular focus on the legacy of what he calls the “colonial library”. A first result of this approach has been a dramatic shift in perspective that has emphasized the historical interdependence and mutual exchange between Africa and the rest of the world (Cooper, 2000), and at the same time demonstrated the contribution of African studies to the broader fields of social sciences and humanities (Bates et al., 1993).

In the ensuing debate, particular attention has been paid to the colonial archive as the source and foundation of the colonial library. Among the many contributions, a central role has been played by Stoler (2008) who, despite her focus on Dutch colonialism in East Asia, has raised crucial epistemological issues that have also affected the field of African studies. Stoler’s most important contribution is a new

approach to colonial archives, which are no longer seen as mere repositories of historical data but are increasingly being explored as objects of research. She argues that colonial archives embody the uncertainties, ambiguities, contradictions, and even ignorance of the colonial project itself, challenging the representation of colonialism as a centralized and coherent process.

In recent years, the field of African studies has been animated by the proliferation of scholarly research challenging Western epistemologies from a more radical perspective, calling for an Afrocentric perspective reminiscent of Cheikh Anta Diop's proposals. The latest results of this scholarly approach can be found in the work of Falola (2022), who proposes auto-ethnography as an alternative methodological approach to the study of African societies. Falola reaffirms as a priority the need to integrate indigenous systems into the formal Western style of education, arguing that African scholars should disengage from the West and its colonial library and base their research on alternative archives created by memory, orality, images, and photographs.

This volume adds to the extensive body of literature that from the 1960s onwards has examined sources and methodologies in African history and how they have evolved over time. Each chapter in this volume reflects on a specific type of source or set of sources, offering case studies that together provide a comprehensive overview of the methods and sources used by historians, anthropologists, and linguists working on Africa. The topics explored in this volume include the significance of oral sources and how they relate to written sources, the perspectives provided by female writings on and from Africa, the importance of Islamic court records for studying Africa, the use of songs and poetry in understanding contemporary political protests, the employment of photographs and other visual sources to study Africa's past, the relevance of new sources or reinterpretations of existing sources for reevaluating historical periodization, and, finally, how biographies and autobiographies—including personal experiences with fieldwork in Africa—can shed light on the continent's history.

The volume adopts a broad definition of what constitutes a source for African history. To illustrate this, it begins with two personal accounts that highlight the significance of conducting fieldwork in Africa in terms of method. The first account is by the historian Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch, who describes her encounter with African sources during her first fieldwork in former French Equatorial Africa. It was 1965, only few years after independence. It is a fascinating journey, through archives that no one had yet seen and the discovery of oral sources that make clear how personal experiences in the field can serve as important reflections on method as well as sources in themselves. The second chapter in this section focuses on later periods and future perspectives of the anthropologist Judith Narowe. She recalls her two fieldworks in Ethiopia, one in the 1980s and another in the 2000s, with a particular emphasis on her interaction with Ethiopian women. She highlights how person-to-person relationships became crucial sources of knowledge to complement other types of sources, especially statistics. As several chapters in the book emphasize, the comparison and combination of different types of sources are crucial for studying the history of the continent.

Finding new sources, as well as revisiting and reinterpreting well-known ones, contributes to the development of new periodizations and the challenging of existing ones, as Sect. 2 highlights. In his chapter, Alessandro Bausi questions the validity of the definition of a “Middle Age” in the history of Ethiopia and argues for a reassessment of Ethiopia’s history within a broader global context. This includes the revaluation of scholars who were already doing so in the 1920s. Gianfranco Lusini, through a re-examination of the epigraphic document *RIÉ* 186 = *DAE* 8, argues that the transition from polytheism to Christianity in Ethiopia was a gradual process, contradicting previous, more simplistic explanations. Lusini also offers new insights into the distribution of languages and cultures in the Kingdom of Aksum. Torsten Hylén combines the analysis of two sources—one biographical and one legal—to reconsider the stories and myths surrounding the first Muslim migration to Africa. This migration, which involved Prophet Muhammad’s followers seeking refuge in Ethiopia and receiving protection from the emperor, holds significant historical importance for African Muslims and the origins of their faith. However, its reliability has been debated by scholars. Hylén argues that the migration did indeed occur, while acknowledging that some of the related events may have been mythologized over time. As both Bausi and Hylén emphasize, periodizations can be shaped by political and religious motivations, and the discovery of new sources or a fresh examination of existing ones can help reveal hidden truths.

Written sources, often used in combination with oral and material sources, have played a crucial role in reconstructing Africa’s past. Africanist historians have heavily relied on administrative sources from colonial archives, both in the former colonies and European metropolises, to study the political, economic, and social history of Africa. The third section of the volume is devoted to written sources that historians of Africa can employ. In his chapter, Jonathan Miran draws attention to Islamic court records, specifically those of Massawa, in Eritrea. These locally produced sources provide insights into the lives of ordinary, often overlooked individuals and groups, such as women, children, and enslaved people, shedding light on their social and economic lives. Written sources by missionaries have also played a significant role in the study of African history, extending beyond religious and church history. Lars Berge highlights in his chapter that these sources are “exceptionally rich” thanks to missionaries’ language expertise, often life-long experiences, and first-hand information about local regions. By comparing the Swedish Evangelical Mission and the Church of Sweden Mission Church, Berge argues that to fully exploit their potential for understanding the economic and social history of Africa and Africans, it is necessary to examine the specific motivations of different missionary societies and the contexts in which they originated and operated. Personal and unofficial writings by colonized women are difficult to locate in colonial Africa. However, Massimo Zaccaria’s chapter stands out by revealing a collection of sources written by Eritrean women. These women were wives of Eritrean soldiers who wrote letters to their husbands fighting in other Italian colonies, as well as to the Italian administration of the colony. These sources shed light on the independent spaces in which these women operated in their relationship with the colonial state, as well as their growing awareness of a broader world within the empire.

The study of colonial archives remains a significant component of African studies and scholarly research, particularly for the 19th and first half of the twentieth centuries. Africanist historians have explored these documents against the grain to uncover the *voices* of Africans during the colonial period. Section 4 focuses on these sources and especially on the divide between public/official documents and personal/unofficial ones. Bianca Carcangiu focuses on the discovery and exploration of archival traces related to the activities of the French Communist Party in the colonies, providing insights into the political and religious history of colonized Africans. Federica Guazzini discusses the relevance of the personal papers of the colonial officer Leopoldo Franchetti for understanding Italian colonialism in Eritrea, emphasizing the methodological challenges related to the use and interpretation of these specific sources.

Biographies and autobiographies are vital sources for studying the African continent. As Lee Cassanelli argues for twentieth-century Somalia, they provide insights into the emergence of local notions of individual and collective agency and how these change over time, both within the country and in the diaspora. Elena Vezzadini examines the lives of three Sudanese artists to explore the contribution that their artistic productions, such as songs and poems, make when analysed in relation to the biographies of the people who created them. These sources offer a means of writing political history *from below*. In her chapter, Silvia Bruzzi highlights the importance of personal papers of scholars who have worked in Africa. She specifically focuses on the papers of the Italian anthropologist Ester Panatta, arguing that they are valuable for revealing the scholar's personal relationship with the communities she studied, but also for the historical sources and documents she collected during her time in colonized Libya.

Historians of Africa have played a pioneering role in the debate about the use of photographic and other visual materials as sources for their studies. The Central National Library in Rome holds the most significant photographic collection on Africa in Italy, which includes the "Libya fund". Federico Cresti analyses this collection of visual sources and highlights its relevance for studying Libya and the other Italian colonies in Africa. Karin Pallaver addresses the historiographical significance and value of iconographic materials in her chapter on coins as a source for African history. She emphasizes how African institutions and European colonial states have used specific images on coins to represent themselves, and how African currency users have engaged with these images.

Studying recent conflicts and revolutionary movements presents several methodological challenges, both in terms of available sources and their accessibility. Uoldelul Chelati Dirar examines the different epistemologies that have coalesced to shape the contemporary state of Eritrea, analysing the complex interplay between pre-colonial politics, colonial administration, and revolutionary theories. The author uses the case of Eritrea to interrogate, in a broader perspective, the complex legacy that colonial policies have bequeathed to the African state and proposes an analytical framework that prioritizes the role of African agency rather than replicating the victimization approach. Tekeste Negash uses the Eritrea-Ethiopia peace treaty of 9 July 2018 to discuss the evolving nature of Eritrean-Ethiopian relations since the

1950s. Awet Weldemichael provides an overview of scattered and diverse primary sources, as well as an outline of the published literature in both popular and scholarly realms that reflects on the methodological challenges and opportunities of studying insurgencies in the Horn of Africa.

As Coquery-Vidrovitch points out in her contribution to this volume, sources are often difficult to find, and it often takes a strong determination and creative thinking to uncover them. The chapters in this volume testify to this tenacity and imagination and, ultimately, to the importance of the methodologies developed for studying Africa not only in understanding the continent itself, but also to the advancement of the historical method.

There are several reasons why a volume like this one comes into being. It can be the result of a thematic workshop, a call for papers, or made by invitation. *Africa as Method* has its own story. The idea to put it together came to us during the fall of 2020, when friends and colleagues started discussing how to celebrate the retirement of Irma Taddia, Professor of African History at the University of Bologna. Throughout her long and productive academic career, Irma worked on several topics, but perhaps the theme she contributed the most to is that of sources and methodologies. With a particular but not exclusive attention to the Horn of Africa, Irma Taddia has used oral sources extensively to reconstruct the colonial experience. Her work on oral sources in relation to Italian colonialism has been central to the development of a critical approach to the use of oral sources and has offered the unique opportunity to vent voice to both the former colonised Africans (Taddia, 1996) and former Italian settlers (Taddia, 1988), thus unveiling the complexity of the colonial milieu and emphasizing the agency of local actors (Taddia, 1994, 1998b). Always aware of the value but also the limitations of these sources, she reflected extensively on how to use them and how to combine them with other types of sources, which she also mastered. Her first monograph (Taddia, 1986)—which remains one of the most important works on the colonial history of Eritrea—was largely based on colonial sources from the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as well as on Eritrean regional archives (Taddia, 1998a). At the same time, she has contributed extensively to the discovery and mapping of new and at that time untapped missionary (Taddia & Luciani, 1988) and colonial archives (Taddia, 1997, 1998a) as well as to the mapping and valorization of local manuscript traditions (Taddia et al., 1995). With a rigorous and meticulous focus on methodology and its epistemological foundations, Irma Taddia has thus played a crucial role in the historiographical debate on the Horn of Africa from the pre-colonial period to the post-colonial developments. This included a special attention to the process of state formation in the region and a detailed analysis of the interplay between colonialism and local agency in this long process (Taddia, 1990; 1993).

She edited several documents of the personal papers of Giovanni Ellero, a colonial officer who served in Eritrea and Ethiopia (Taddia et al., 1997, 2000, 2005). She also edited the personal papers of the Russian ethnographer Maria Right, believing that telling a scholar's personal experiences with fieldwork is a relevant source in itself (Taddia, 2009). She collected the letters that the Eritrean intellectual *Blatta Gäbrä Egzi'abeḥēr* wrote to the Ethiopian emperor Menelik (Taddia, 1994).

In summary, Irma used and reflected on almost all the sources discussed in this volume. Her career was characterized by the continuous search for new sources, that she collected, interpreted, and combined. She was convinced that there were no better sources than others. She used to say that a source is a source, no matter whether it is written, oral, or material. The important thing, she always emphasized, is to interpret it rigorously as historians always need to do. With this book, her friends and colleagues wish to pay homage and celebrate her extraordinary academic achievements as well as the mentoring and friendship that has shaped the academic trajectory of many of them.

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The Field as an Archive

Recherche Des Sources En Afrique Equatoriale



Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch

Abstract My discovery of African sources for modern Equatorial Africa began in 1965, and I went there for a dozen of years, exploring archival materials and, above all, African modes of living, thinking and acting. I arrived there only 5 years after independence and many things had not yet changed since colonial times. Practical conditions were not easy, especially out of great cities, then limited to Libreville in Gabon and Brazzaville in Congo. This immersion into such a new environment was a splendid experience.

Keywords Fieldwork · French Equatorial Africa · Oral sources · Archives · Interdisciplinarity

La Quête des Sources en Afrique Équatoriale Francophone

Contrairement aux idées reçues, les sources en histoire africaine ne sont pas différentes des autres sources; ou, plus exactement, quelles que soient les sources, le traitement en est analogue: d'abord les chercher pour les trouver, ensuite les analyser de façon critique: sont-elles fiables? On parlait naguère de «critique externe» et de «critique interne» des sources. Dans le premier cas, on vérifie l'authenticité de la source, dans le second on analyse, en fonction de sa nature, de son auteur, de son contexte, de son histoire, quel genre de renseignement elle peut nous fournir qui relève de la réalité historique mais aussi des biais introduits aussi bien par le regard de l'auteur de la source que par celui de l'historien qui la décrypte.

Que de fois ne m'a-t-on demandé, au fil de ma carrière, à propos des sources de l'histoire africaine: «Ah, il y en a donc?» «Comment les trouvez vous?». J'avais coutume de dire aux étudiants qui, tout en proposant un sujet de recherche, hésitaient en pensant qu'il ou elle «ne trouverait pas de sources», que pour trouver il suffisait de chercher. Une source est rarement donnée, il faut parfois une bonne dose de ténacité, voire d'imagination, pour les détecter. Dans mon domaine, qui est celui de

C. Coquery-Vidrovitch (✉)
The University of Paris, Paris, France
e-mail: catherine.vidrovitch@orange.fr

l'histoire contemporaine, les sources africaines sont très abondantes: écrites (le plus souvent par des étrangers), orales transmises localement par des «traditionnistes» et recueillies parfois depuis longtemps par écrit, témoignages oraux de témoins ou d'héritiers de témoins, ce qui n'est pas la même chose car il s'agit d'une transmission quasi directe de souvenirs qui ne sont pas nécessairement devenus déjà mémoire. L'archéologie du quotidien, les cultures matérielles sont aussi importantes, les gestes du quotidien aussi....

Bien entendu, des périodes anciennes présentent davantage de lacunes, surtout dans les zones qui n'ont pas été ou très peu visitées par des observateurs anciens dont on a conservé la trace. Il y a en Afrique, c'est vrai, par exemple en Afrique centro-équatoriale, des régions où les savoirs habituels sont maigres avant les 15^e ou 16^e siècle. Mais la quête des sources peut alors se comparer à celle d'autres aires historiques pauvres en sources écrites: les débuts de l'Antiquité et même au-delà, le haut Moyen Âge occidental, etc. Les historiens de l'Afrique ont fait comme les autres historiens: ils se sont appuyés sur d'autres données: sources climatiques, hydrographiques, linguistiques, observations de la faune et de la flore, etc. Nulle part, là où l'être humain a fait société, quelle qu'elle soit, il est impossible de ne pas trouver trace de sources.

L'exemple choisi dans le texte qui suit évite une grande part de ces écueils, puisqu'il s'agit d'une histoire des 19^e et 20^e siècle. Pourtant, quand je commençai à étudier l'histoire de l'Afrique équatoriale depuis l'occupation française, qu'on appelait alors «Congo» (il s'agissait de ce qui est devenu l'ensemble de l'Afrique équatoriale française (AEF) en 1905, c'est à dire le Gabon, le Congo Brazzaville, la Centrafrique et le Tchad d'aujourd'hui), personne encore ne s'était attaqué à cette histoire dont les sources demeuraient ignorées. Mon propos ici est donc de montrer comment j'ai abordé cette question des «sources à trouver»: se munir de recommandations des «personnes ressource», rechercher les archives et autres documents à explorer et, s'agissant d'un pays étranger dont je ne connaissais pas grand chose, chercher à comprendre le terrain et la façon dont ses habitants réagissaient, bref s'imprégner de tout ce qui pourrait faire comprendre le monde encore inconnu que j'allais explorer.

En 1965, jeune historienne ne connaissant pas encore l'Afrique, j'obtenais une mission de trois mois pour aborder mes recherches sur l'Afrique équatoriale française coloniale. L'objectif officiel, et réel de mes premiers voyages était précisément la recherche de toutes les sources possibles, à l'intérieur du pays, sources écrites, orales, matérielles, culturelles susceptibles de soutenir la recherche. Hasard, flair et organisation, le chercheur a besoin de tout cela pour avancer. J'avais deux pistes principales: d'une part les archives administratives coloniales et les archives privées, et d'autre part toutes les rencontres prévues ou à prévoir, de lieux et de paysages, de témoins et de descendants de témoins qui avaient vécu cette histoire.

Les Archives Françaises

Jusqu'alors je n'avais consulté que les archives de France, limitées aux documents abondants issus de l'ex ministère des colonies et restées, au temps des débuts de ma recherche, dans le local parisien du ministère. Les archives parisiennes ne concernaient que les instructions envoyées de Paris et les réponses des gouverneurs généraux de fédérations. C'était des rapports d'ensemble synthétiques (trimestriels et annuels), fort complets mais avarés des détails concrets dont ils étaient issus car filtrés en deux étapes au moins. À l'origine se trouvaient les rapports réguliers, quasi quotidiens parfois, rédigés par les administrateurs localement en poste. Ceux-ci les adressaient au chef-lieu de leur circonscription d'où ils partaient pour le gouvernement de la colonie. Chaque gouverneur en dressait la synthèse, qui allait aboutir à la capitale de la fédération: Brazzaville pour l'AEF, Dakar pour l'AOF. Ce que je trouvais à Paris n'était que le filtrage final. À Paris néanmoins se trouvaient aussi, à côté des archives administratives coloniales proprement dites, le fonds énorme des 40 grandes concessions trentenaires (c. 1898c. 1928) qui étaient l'objet de ma thèse d'État: accordées par l'État français, elles remettaient des rapports annuels conséquents. D'autres documents les complétaient: le fonds Missions qui conservait les rapports des Inspecteurs des colonies envoyés par l'État pour contrôler le tout. Ces inspections étaient réputées indépendantes des services inspectés, donc souvent plus fidèles aux réalités de terrain et parfois sévères. Ce fut une chance de retrouver par hasard le rapport fameux réputé disparu voire détruit, dit de la «Commission Lannessan» du nom du président du groupe chargé de le rédiger (Coquery-Vidrovitch et al., 2014). Ce «rapport Brazza» fut rédigé au Ministère fin 1905, à la suite d'une mission d'inspection redoutable de six mois (février–septembre 1905) dirigée par l'ancien explorateur et Commissaire Général de l'AEF, Savorgnan de Brazza, envoyée à la suite d'exactions et de scandales qui avaient effrayé l'opinion publique. Le rapport, d'un peu plus de 100 pages, fut si sévère que l'engagement pris auprès de l'Assemblée Nationale de le publier ne fut pas tenu. Il finit par tomber dans l'oubli jusqu'à ce que j'en retrouve (en 1966, après mon retour du Congo) dans les archives parisiennes l'unique exemplaire rescapé. C'était celui remis au ministre, accompagné d'un mot lapidaire du Directeur des Affaires Africaines du ministère: «dix exemplaires imprimés par l'Imprimerie nationale, un au ministre et le reste dans le coffre-fort du ministère». Sensible à l'importance du document, je le fis photocopier; bien des années plus tard, j'eus l'occasion de le faire publier et de l'annoter grâce au dossier riche d'une bonne dizaine de gros rapports rédigés par les compagnons de Brazza. Cette trouvaille était due au classement tardif (2010) du fonds Missions.¹ Elle permet de comparer le contenu adouci du rapport Lannessan (Brazza était mort à Dakar au retour de sa mission) aux rapports originaux de terrain parfois meurtriers.

¹ Les Archives d'Outre-Mer avaient déménagé en 1965 dans le bâtiment nouvellement construit à Aix-en-Provence, devenu l'ANOM (Archives Nationales d'Outre-Mer).

Les Archives Coloniales

Mais les archives coloniales proprement dites avaient été détenues à Brazzaville pour l'AEF et Dakar pour l'AOF. La politique française en AEF avait été radicale: tout rapporter dans l'ancienne métropole à l'indépendance. Elles n'étaient pas consultables car restées plusieurs années en rade sur les quais de Bordeaux, puis stockées dans les caves du château de Pierrefitte, attendant la construction du bâtiment des archives d'Outre-mer à Aix-en-Provence. Je n'eus que la chance de participer, durant quinze jours, à leur premier classement à Aix-en-Provence à mon retour de mission en 1966. Car au cours de leurs pérégrinations, les bordereaux et listings avaient été perdus. Seul pouvait les ré-identifier l'ancien archiviste de Brazzaville de 1952 à 1957, Jean Glénisson, un médiéviste que l'on fit revenir de l'EHESS pour ouvrir les caisses. Connaissant mon impatience à leur égard, il avait obtenu l'autorisation d'avoir mon aide pour reconstituer les séries. Les séries, qui ne bénéficiaient d'un inventaire imprimé que jusqu'en 1920, se poursuivaient jusqu'en 1958. Malheureusement, la consultation s'arrêtait alors à l'année 1920, or ma thèse se poursuivait jusqu'aux années 1930 au moins. Je n'avais que la chance aléatoire de tomber sur un dossier mal classé postérieur à la limite.

Du côté des archives privées, j'avais fait en France une récolte assez maigre auprès des héritiers des entreprises coloniales, au premier chef auprès de Luc Durand-Réville, personnage important de l'économie coloniale au Gabon. Lui et les quelques patrons auxquels il m'adressa n'avaient pas conservé grand chose de ces temps d'avant guerre. Au moins possédaient-ils le jeu complet des rapports annuels imprimés distribués aux actionnaires depuis les origines des sociétés concernées, puisque le siège social en avait toujours été Paris. C'était exploitable mais limité. Trouver de la documentation en Afrique restait essentiel. J'allais butiner un peu partout dans ces pays entre 1965 et 1967.

Je combinais constamment les recherches concernant la 3^e mission de Brazza (1883-5), dont l'objet était la prise de concessions de la colonie dite alors du Congo français, objet de ma petite thèse, à celle de l'analyse de la quarantaine de compagnies concessionnaires qui avaient reçu de l'Etat français le monopole du commerce (ivoire et caoutchouc essentiellement) dans la plus grande de ce qui deviendrait l'AEF. Ma récolte fut maigre. Le climat très humide ne permettait guère de conserver les documents, et les agents commerciaux ne s'y intéressaient guère. En revanche, j'appris énormément en faisant parler les employés et tout simplement en observant, circulant, interrogeant, ce qui permettrait plus tard de confronter ces expériences vécues à celles révélées par les documents.

L'enquête à l'intérieur du pays était nécessaire. La démarche était simple en apparence: une fois arrivée dans les petits centres urbains, je m'adressais, munie des autorisations de la Présidence, aux préfets et sous préfets locaux. Mais il n'existait nulle part un service d'archives, encore moins des archivistes. On m'offrait en général de maigres registres remontant au plus à deux ou trois ans. Ce fut toute une affaire. D'abord expliquer ce que c'était, et ensuite en trouver. Il y en avait quasiment partout, conservées de façon très inégale. C'est seulement à partir des années 1980 que les

services des différents États de l'ex-AEF les regroupèrent dans un centre dédié de la capitale. On en était encore loin.

J'avais en partant une idée un peu folle: refaire, autant que faire se peut, le trajet de la troisième mission de Savorgnan de Brazza (1883–5), thème de ma thèse de 3^e cycle (Coquery-Vidrovitch, 1966). Cette mission avait consisté à remonter le fleuve Ogooué de la côte gabonaise vers l'intérieur et de descendre le fleuve Congo jusqu'au Pool. Ce fut un itinéraire aventureux où, de petit centre en petit centre, avec des moyens très différents qui allaient de l'avion à quatre places à la pirogue, en passant par les «quatre-quatre» inévitables sur des pistes invraisemblables, avec des compagnons de route divers, je rencontrai des témoins et devais trouver la façon de les aborder.

Les Moyens de Transport et la Découverte des Chantiers Forestiers

Le tout était d'arriver dans les différentes étapes prévues, puisqu'il n'existait ni transport en commun ni route carrossable. La route gabonaise permettait tout juste d'aller de Libreville à l'île de Lambaréné; quant au Congo, il n'existait entre le port de Pointe-Noire et la capitale qu'une étroite piste de terre, et au nord de Brazzaville le goudron s'arrêtait au "km 44". Au-delà, il était difficile de procéder; même les "quatre-quatre" ne parvenaient que de façon épisodique jusqu'à Ouesso. Il me reste de ces périple les photos d'énormes camions grumiers transportant à grand peine le précieux bois d'okoumé, embourbés à la queue leu-leu dès que les pluies devenaient plus fortes, à demi versés sur le bord de la piste quand ils ne la bloquaient pas pour plusieurs heures, voire plusieurs jours, pour les autres véhicules tout terrain.

L'engin le plus original fut à Libreville le premier: un biplan entoilé de 7 places qui datait de l'entre deux guerres. L'autre exemplaire, identique, avait brûlé une quinzaine de jours auparavant d'un retour de flamme sur la piste. Heureusement, les freins étaient déficients. Comme le terrain d'atterrissage à Ndjolé était précaire (une courte piste de brousse de terre cabossée), le pilote nous transféra avec les caisses de légumes frais à livrer dans un autre avion de quatre places. L'autre passagère était une jeune Gabonaise timide qui s'en allait à Ndjolé retrouver son père, le pasteur local. Le terrain d'atterrissage était un vague champ ménagé dans la forêt. C'était l'heure de la sieste, la bourgade se trouvait de l'autre côté du fleuve Ogooué, le pilote en repartant avertit que le caboteur ne viendrait pas nous chercher avant un moment. Finalement la pinasse apparut. J'arrivai au comptoir de la Société du Haut Ogooué (SHO) auprès duquel j'étais censée être recommandée. Las, c'était à la SHO-Bois que je devais aller, à une dizaine de km en forêt. Voyant mon désarroi, l'agent SHO m'y conduisit en land-rover. J'arrivais impromptue devant le seigneur du lieu, un certain M. Heurtaux, qui dit tout de go: "pas de chance! Je pars demain pour Libreville". Et puis, parce que tout s'arrangeait en Afrique où le temps n'avait pas la même mesure, après tout, rien ne pressait, il se rendrait au siège la semaine suivante, en attendant

il allait me faire faire le tour de quelques-uns des quatre chantiers dont il avait la responsabilité.

Il arrivait que des grumiers soient coincés plusieurs jours sur les pistes de latérite, et l'on ne part pas sans « emmener trois noirs » avec soi pour se tirer d'embarras. Au retour, une file de 10 camions immobilisés étaient remorqués un à un par un caterpillar: c'était la route nationale du Gabon, celle qui vient du Cameroun, supposée approvisionner l'est du pays. Sur le fleuve, les payeurs Okanda à l'habileté proverbiale (déjà utilisés par Brazza à la fin du 19^e siècle) lancent les billes de bois, énormes, une à une dans les rapides, et les recueillent échouées dans le sable vers Ndjolé, quelque 200 km plus bas, où le fleuve Ogooué devient navigable.

L'un des objectifs du voyage était d'enquêter sur les entreprises forestières de l'intérieur. Je bénéficiai à plusieurs reprises d'autres "occasions" analogues pour aller sur des chantiers. Un chantier comptait en moyenne une centaine de bucherons et deux blancs: le chef du chantier et le mécanicien. Ils restaient là un à deux ans. Tout était construit de leurs mains et la maison du patron était souvent belle et confortable. Leur seul contact avec l'extérieur était le patron. Heurtaux à proprement parler tombait du ciel et pratiquait un paternalisme intelligent, apportant les médicaments, les pièces de rechange éventuelles et le courrier s'il y en avait. Il était exceptionnel. La plupart du temps, le chef du chantier, maître à bord, se conduisait en autocrate. Il organisait des réceptions comme s'il avait habité un château. Je fus à plusieurs reprises reçue avec un certain appareil: c'était si rare! À deux reprises au moins, le repas fut épique. Chacun avait quatre assiettes empilées les unes sur les autres et autant de verres. Les plats (et les changements d'assiette) se succédaient: des radis puis du poisson bouilli, puis côtelette et purée, puis roastbeef et petits pois, enfin fromages, et pour finir gâteau et crème. Les « boys » étant un peu perdus dans le service, cela durait près de trois heures. J'avais eu le même cérémonial chez un sous-préfet, ce qui avait valu bien entendu les commentaires méprisants des blancs: «ils imitent ce que leurs boys ont vu faire chez nous» — ce qui était vrai, le repas de cérémonie d'un chef de chantier en pleine forêt étant du même acabit, avec la même maladresse des « boys », même si la séance était moins longue et toujours terminée au champagne qui coulait à flot chez les forestiers.

L'hôpital Schweizer et les Archives

En fin du séjour, je parvins en une journée en Land-rover en aval jusqu'à Lambaréné. Il fallait franchir quelques ponts pourris et surtout la «montagne de sable» où l'on s'enlisait une fois sur deux. Restaient trois bacs à franchir, d'accès difficile en raison de la pente non aménagée de la rive, surtout quand l'Ogooué était au plus bas, ce qui était le cas en fin de saison sèche. Je débarquai à Lambaréné le lendemain de la mort du docteur Schweitzer, le 5 septembre 1965. Compte tenu du climat, il avait été enterré l'après-midi même. L'île de Lambaréné était en pleine déconfiture. J'étais, dans un grand hôtel délabré—une espèce de casemate rose, ancien relais aérien tombé en faillite avant d'être repris par le forestier—la seule cliente; la nouvelle de la mort

du docteur n'était pas encore parvenue au monde. L'hôtelier était au désespoir: avec la mort de Schweitzer, il perdait son dernier gagne-pain. L'ampleur du bâtiment témoignait de la prospérité d'un passé révolu dont il parlait avec des larmes dans la voix : le temps béni de l'exploitation forestière d'avant guerre, quand en fin de semaine ou du mois les bûcherons des environs débarquaient pour de mémorables « dégagements », qui leur permettaient en une soirée de dilapider leur paye de la semaine ou du mois. Au cours de ce périple et d'autres du même genre, je trouvais des archives dispersées mais introuvables, je découvrais des espaces qui n'avaient pas tellement changé depuis les débuts de la colonisation, et je voyais surtout comment tout cela fonctionnait. J'appris énormément de choses mais, côté archives, je me trouvais presque bredouille, à quelques exceptions près.

À Bangui, capitale de la République centrafricaine (RCA), mon étape suivante, d'archives nationales il n'en existait guère. De celles de l'époque coloniale il n'y avait pas trace. On les retrouva quelques années plus tard, oubliées dans un garage désaffecté. En revanche, en novembre 1965, je travaillai d'arrache-pied dans les archives du Tchad. Elles étaient superbement tenues par un ancien officier méhariste en retraite, le colonel Chapelle, à la tête de l'Institut Tchadien des Sciences Humaines créé en 1961. Il avait ratissé large dans le désert.

Je découvris les archives de Yaoundé au Cameroun en 1967. Elles étaient restées sur place car le territoire, sous mandat international confié à la France, ne dépendait pas du ministère des colonies. Elles étaient remarquablement classées dans une espèce de grand hangar. Malheureusement, cet état excellent n'était pas appelé à subsister. L'incompétence du personnel et les négligences se multiplièrent dans les années suivantes. On retrouvait, m'a-t-on dit, des archives dans le marché central de la ville où les marchandes les utilisaient pour envelopper leurs légumes.

J'ai suivi à partir de 1972 l'histoire des archives de Dakar, riche des archives de l'ancienne fédération d'AOF depuis 1913. Son dernier conservateur français, Jean-François Maurel, y joua un rôle fondamental par son respect archivistique chevillé au corps: les archives devaient demeurer là où elles avaient été conservées. Hors question de les déménager en France: il s'y opposa catégoriquement. Non par conviction politique—il était royaliste—mais par principe professionnel. Il alla jusqu'à refuser en 1976 de prendre à Aix-en Provence la direction des archives de la France d'outre mer injustement rapatriées, préférant se replier momentanément sur les archives départementales. À Dakar, son rôle fut essentiel pour les jeunes historiens francophones: seuls les ouest-africains pouvaient travailler sur place tandis que les autres devaient impérativement venir en France pour consulter les archives de leur pays. Maurel avait formé un successeur sénégalais, Saliou Mbaye, sortit comme lui de l'École des Chartes, devenu titulaire de son poste en 1976 jusqu'à sa retraite en 2005. Les archives de Dakar, alors localisées dans les sous-sol du palais du gouvernement, étaient tenues avec une rigueur certaine malgré les insuffisances du personnel; Saliou Mbaye mit à profit la présence à l'université de Dakar d'une école spécialisée—la seule d'Afrique francophone—l'EBAD (École des Bibliothécaires, Archivistes et Documentalistes créée en 1967). Les étudiants furent chargés de dresser l'inventaire des archives postérieures à 1920; il fit imprimer leur travail—une dizaine d'inventaires par séries—qui ouvrait enfin l'histoire du 20^e siècle colonial

aux chercheurs. C'était une aubaine dont nous avons tous profité, malheureusement mal contrôlée par un responsable local sympathique mais indolent—si bien qu'elles étaient mal rangées, parfois éparpillées au sol par des chercheurs peu scrupuleux. Depuis 2016, tout a changé: un nouveau bâtiment moderne et bien équipé est désormais consacré aux archives sénégalaises. Il est question de passer à la numérisation des documents. Espérons que mes souvenirs du siècle dernier vont devenir définitivement obsolètes, au moins pour les archives de Dakar, bien que l'annexe ait longtemps subsisté....

L'appréhension des Mentalités: les Moments Forts

Cette quête des archives était à la fois préparée, imprévue et constamment provoquée. Ce ne fut pas l'essentiel; après tout, celles que je trouvai ressemblaient fort aux archives coloniales de France. Mais sur place tout était source. Qu'ai-je appris D'abord les modes de contacts, avec le pays, avec les Africains, avec les blancs. Il y avait toute une pédagogie à acquérir. Ce fut l'appréhension concrète, quotidienne et toujours renouvelée du « sous développement ». Il y eut des moments forts (Coquery-Vidrovitch, 2021).

Le Gabon, où je circulai beaucoup, me fit prendre conscience d'une vie rurale à l'époque dépourvue, à tous les niveaux, du moindre confort moderne (sinon chez les rares expatriés de brousse). Pas d'électricité, pas d'eau courante remplacée par la corvée du puits, pas de toilettes sinon «le mauvais bout du village», des instruments de travail rudimentaires, et pourtant des villages d'une propreté remarquable, aidée en cela par les cabris et quelques chiens vaquant en toute liberté. En réalité peu de villages perdus dans la forêt, et de taille réduite: de l'ordre de quelques centaines d'habitants au plus. Le pays était (et est resté) très peu peuplé, sans doute en raison d'une traite négrière intense qui a duré de la fin du 15^e à la fin du 19^e siècle, dont un des résultats fut l'alcoolisme quasi généralisé, les habitants ayant été abreuvés d'alcools de mauvaise qualité pendant des siècles. L'électricité était inconnue dans les bourgades, un groupe électrogène n'existait éventuellement que chez les expatriés. Les gens étaient d'une extrême gentillesse, mais timides et parfois si méfiants qu'ils n'étaient pas toujours faciles à aborder, même si les enfants étaient curieux de l'étrangère impromptue. C'est l'accumulation de ces rencontres souvent dues au hasard ou à ma quête de témoins qui finit par me pénétrer du cadre dans lequel s'inséraient mes recherches. Ceci dit, je n'étais pas anthropologue, et la plupart du temps je ne séjournais pas assez longtemps pour établir des contacts de confiance. Je me contentais d'aller dans le plus de villages possible, d'observer en permanence, d'acheter aussi aux villageois, pour des prix dérisoires, des ustensiles d'usage courant dont je me faisais expliquer l'usage: une houe, un mortier à bananes, des sagaies à cochon faites d'un bâton noueux raccordé par une corde à une pointe de lance qui pouvait s'emmancher sur le manche mais aussi, lancée, s'en détacher de la longueur de la corde pour atteindre le phacochère visé.

Le plus fascinant était l'approche de la vie quotidienne, mélange détonnant de «tradition» et de «modernité»: cultes populaires (le *mbwiti* gabonais, le *ndop* sénégalais), la dépendance des épouses, et mes doutes sur les relations ambiguës entre «tradition» et «modernité», notamment à l'occasion de la visite chez le roi Makoko des Batéké. Le culte *mbwiti* gabonais est un rite initiatique utilisant les racines pilées d'*iboga*, plante à vertus hallucinatoires (Sillans et al., 1972; Gollnhoffer, 1973; Mary, 2007). Avant qu'il ne devienne une espèce de mode touristique prisée par certains voyageurs, j'ai assisté à une cérémonie qui n'avait rien de secret, tenue devant et dans un mini-temple de Libreville. Le surnaturel y a une grande place, aidée par la décoction d'une plante hallucinatoire qui place le sujet dans un univers mystico-spirituel et thérapeutique. Pour son rite de passage, l'absorption d'une dose massive d'*iboga* permet ainsi au néophyte d'obtenir des visions spectaculaires dont le récit aux initiateurs servent à valider son initiation. Je rencontrai aussi, non loin de la ville au «kilomètre 23», «Jean XXIII». C'était l' élu et le prophète d'un culte syncrétique où se mélangent tant bien que mal données «animistes» et souvenirs de l'école des missions. Jean XXIII expliquait ses révélations liées au culte *mbwiti*, aidé par la consommation d'*iboga*. Le culte plus médical d'ombouiri l'utilise pour guérir les malades, devant des autels où des poteaux et de gros «fétiches» honorent les ancêtres. Les révélations de Jean XXIII, qui fumait aussi le chanvre, lui avaient appris que ses parents morts étaient devenus blancs. Bien que très noir, il était donc lui-même un blanc fils de blanc. Dans son petit temple de bois, il conservait une statuette de style « Saint Sulpice » représentant la vierge et l'enfant, une autre de Saint Joseph, et expliqua qu'il s'agissait de son père et de sa mère et de lui-même petit enfant. Il incarnait aussi Paul VI et se disait immortel. Mais ses quatre épouses avaient pris la fuite, lui laissant trois fils avec lesquels il officiait. C'était un exemple pitoyable des corollaires pseudo religieux de la colonisation.

Les pratiques thérapeutiques ancestrales ne sont pas propres au Gabon. Deux ans plus tard, j'assistai à un rite de même espèce, dit au Sénégal *ndop*. La grande différence, c'est que les chercheurs de l'hôpital psychiatrique de Fann à Dakar, pionnier dans le domaine de la psychiatrie en Afrique subsaharienne sous la direction du médecin militaire français Henri Collomb, cherchait à conjuguer pour les patients la médecine moderne aux pratiques des thérapeutes traditionnels utilisées pour soigner les maladies mentales (Collomb et al., 1961; Collignon, 1978). L'équipe avait compris que la psychiatrie à l'occidentale réduite à un dialogue entre le patient et le thérapeute était une aberration en Afrique où le collectif domine. En sus de la thérapie de groupe pratiquée à l'hôpital, ce *ndop* eut lieu à Rufisque. C'est une cérémonie quasi publique visant à exorciser les esprits malfaisants, les *rab*. Ce genre de pratique marquait d'évidence la symbiose opérée entre le « traditionnel » et le « moderne », sans contradiction majeure, les protagonistes passant apparemment sans problème d'un univers à l'autre et ce quasi en permanence. En prendre la mesure aidait à saisir la logique d'un univers qui échappait le plus souvent à l'occidental enfermé dans son mode de penser. Cette observation vaut pour toutes celles que j'ai pu effectuer sur le monde supposé «traditionnel».

Un moment révélateur fut la visite au roi Makoko, lointain successeur de celui qui avait accueilli Brazza en 1880 et signé, ou plutôt apposé une croix en guise de

signature, au traité que celui-ci lui avait présenté mettant son royaume à la disposition de la France.

Mbé était alors un village plutôt cossu, tout en terre sauf le «palais» «en dur» du Makoko, avec école, maternité, secrétaire de sa majesté et responsable Jeunesse du Mouvement Nationale Révolutionnaire (JMNR) qui nous offrit fort galamment le quartier général de ses troupes: une belle case de trois pièces. Nous avons sorti notre matériel: lits ramis à moustiquaire adaptée et lampes à gaz. Le lendemain matin était le jour de l'entrevue avec le Makoko, tout de rouge vêtu et entouré de ses femmes et d'anciens de sa cour. Nous avons parlé avec interprète, les anciens se souvenaient de Brazza, leur grand homme. Je leur demandai entre autres pourquoi les Batéké étaient si puissants, et ils me répondirent d'un commun accord «les Batékés sont toujours puissants». «Pourquoi»? «parce que chez eux la puissance est innée». Nous leur offrîmes une bonbonne de vin et un pagne doré (Coquery-Vidrovitch, 1972).

Nous allâmes ensuite jusqu'au bout de la piste, à Ngabé sur le Congo. C'était un village téké important. Après les salutations d'usage, la réunion se tint dans la case des palabres en compagnie d'une petite douzaine de vieillards chargés de raconter le passé. Le médiateur et interprète était le secrétaire du Makoko, le seul qui parlait et écrivait le français, et qui était aussi l'instituteur du village. Il s'agissait de personnages importants: il y avait celui chargé de lui mettre le collier autour du coup le jour de son intronisation (mais ce n'était plus le collier sacré, puisque le roi n'était plus roi que de nom ou à peu près), et d'autres hauts dignitaires. Je n'étais pas dupe de ce que je pouvais récolter: je savais que le grand historien et anthropologue belge Jan Vansina venait de passer huit mois sur le plateau pour recueillir l'histoire de ce peuple au 19^e siècle. Il suffisait d'attendre la publication de son ouvrage pour en apprendre bien davantage (Vansina, 1976). Néanmoins je me prêtai volontiers à l'exercice qui était pour moi aussi nouveau que passionnant. Je posais quelques questions. Je les laissais me raconter ce qu'ils savaient de leur glorieux ancêtre le Makoko Ilo. Un moment, la discussion entre les vieux devint particulièrement passionnée et rapide. Bref, ils se chamaillaient ferme. L'interprète, dépassé, s'était arrêté de traduire. Je le pressai de me dire ce qu'il se passait. Il me fit cette réponse superbe: «ils sont en train de se mettre d'accord pour vous répondre la même chose que ce qu'ils ont dit à Vansina»: belle réflexion sur la méthodologie des enquêtes orales! Nous sommes ensuite allés leur acheter quelques bouteilles dans la boutique du coin, tenue par une Française un peu paumée et fort amère qui était arrivé 26 ans auparavant pour faire fortune avec son compagnon, et qui finissait ses jours à Ngabé par manque de moyens pour son billet de retour.

Ces interviews me rendaient perplexe. Je ne mettais pas en doute la conscience professionnelle des spécialistes ethnologues et anthropologues qui passaient parfois des mois, voire des années à étudier un terrain restreint. On en était en 1965 à la redécouverte de ces sources orales parfois uniques en pays où dominait encore l'oralité. Yves Person (1962) avait écrit pour réhabiliter les sources orales un article fondateur dans les *Cahiers d'Études Africaines* mais sa grande œuvre sur Samori n'était pas encore écrite. En qualité d'historienne classique, j'avais appris à l'époque la nécessité d'utiliser les sources à bon escient : pour cela, il fallait procéder à deux types de contrôle : la critique externe et la critique interne des sources, quelles qu'elles soient,

écrites, orales, matérielles, etc ; je ne faisais pas d'exception pour les «traditions»: étaient-elles authentiques ? Avaient-elles traversé les siècles sans dommage ni fluctuations? Pouvait-on faire confiance à la mémoire? Les anthropologues le savent bien, et cherchent de sources différentes les traditions relevant de tel ou tel événement de façon à corriger, amender, interpréter. Yves Person était un passionné. Mais il était aussi administrateur colonial, et avait fait usage de son pouvoir pour trouver et interroger ses informateurs. Cela avait-il influencé le discours reçu? Alors il fallait passer à la critique interne: que nous révélaient ces sources, quelle que soit leur origine, orales ou écrites: c'était la réalité telle que vue par l'auteur: le conteur, ou l'écrivain. D'où la nécessité de ne pas prendre la source pour argent comptant, mais de vérifier, de comparer, bref d'interpréter. Mon interview avec les vieux Batéké était à cet égard révélatrice. L'analyse qu'en fit Jan Vansina était exemplaire. Mais fut-ce toujours le cas?

Sources et Interdisciplinarité

En définitive ces épisodes posaient à l'historienne que j'étais de vraies questions. S'imposait la nécessité de la multidisciplinarité, donc du travail d'équipe: il fallait à la fois pratiquer l'histoire, l'anthropologie et les langues locales. J'étais insuffisamment outillée mais au moins je connaissais mes limites. Ma culture africaine, à l'époque, n'était qu'anthropologique, puisque pour la zone que j'étudiais j'étais l'une des premières historiennes à défricher le terrain. Mais l'histoire apprend à pratiquer en permanence l'aller-retour entre le passé et le présent, et à constamment chercher à interpréter ce que prétendaient dicter les sources. J'ai beaucoup regretté, à cette époque, la barrière disciplinaire—et je déplorais et continue parfois de déplorer, dans les bibliographies des collègues anthropologues, politistes, sociologues, l'absence de «culture historique» qu'elles révélaient, au nom du préjugé longtemps durable (et d'ailleurs parfois encore mérité) entachant l'«histoire coloniale». Plus que jamais, j'adhère à cette vérité si vigoureusement affirmée par Marc Bloch (1949): tout est source, cela vaut d'évidence pour les historiens, mais cela devrait valoir aussi pour les autres... dont je souhaiterais souvent qu'ils lisent les historiens autant que les historiens les lisent, car on ne s'improvise pas plus historien qu'anthropologue: l'anthropologie historique n'est pas synonyme d'histoire anthropologique. Le savoir, quel qu'il soit, sur le non occidental, impose le travail d'équipe et le croisement des compétences et des regards, ne serait-ce que pour échapper à l'héritage tenace de l'instinct de supériorité occidentale doublé en sus de supériorité disciplinaire. Pour comprendre l'autre, il faut aussi savoir que «sa» vérité n'est pas plus ni moins vérité que la nôtre si elle n'est pas passée à la moulINETTE d'une critique historique aussi rigoureuse qu'implacable; mieux vaut le faire ensemble que chacun de son côté.

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Moments of Sharing: Fieldwork in Ethiopia (1988–2008)



Judith Narrowe

Abstract In this chapter, I recount two fieldwork periods in Ethiopia. In the first, I evaluate the educational component of a Swedish-supported water project in rural Ethiopia where, quite unusually, local women were trained to carry out and manage the project. In the second, I focus on the Ethiopian government's then-new gender-educational policy and the views of students and teachers at a large urban teacher's college toward the policy. My goal here is to determine how the policy was understood and applied—or not applied—in the college. In both, my involvement in person-to-person relationships became quintessential sources of knowledge; I constantly encountered a broad plethora of opinions, explanations, and personal recollections of meaning-filled incidents. Only with all of these in mind did my diligent perusal of additional sources—comparative studies, academic articles, and statistics—make sense.

Keywords Ethiopia · Fieldwork · Ethnography · Sharing · Feelings

Introduction

In the late fall of 1988, I traveled to Ethiopia for the first time. My task was to help evaluate the Dodota Water Supply Project for the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA).

For the following twenty years, I returned many times. I participated in several more evaluations, did a study of “lessons learned” and between 2002 and 2006, I conducted an intensive long-term ethnographic study of the Ethiopian government's new gender policy and how it was being understood and implemented at a large teacher's college in Addis Ababa. And somewhere in the middle of all those years, I taught an introductory course in social anthropology at the teacher's college and supervised a teacher and student exchange program between the college in Addis and my college in Sweden.

J. Narrowe (✉)
Dalarna University, Falun, Sweden
e-mail: judith.narrowe@gmail.com

In every evaluation and study, whoever the participants and whatever the research context, my methods were always qualitative: many semi-structured interviews and many impromptu conversations with both individuals and groups, intensive orally delivered life stories, and days and weeks and sometimes months of “hanging around”, or to put it more anthropologically, “participating and observing”. I also used visuals to elicit and document thoughts and ideas about the issue(s) we were dealing with. The visual materials were made by people I worked with and soon became the basis for our many long and insightful discussions.

Very often in the doing of all this, I (silently) wondered about my own influence on the studies—how and whether all my involvement and interaction with people in the field or my just *being there* revealed or was affected by some particular aspects of my world and my *self*. These thoughts were reminiscent of what I had learned in the early 1970s when I was an undergraduate student in social anthropology: “The social anthropologist, him or herself”, we learned, “is always the main research tool”. Who indeed was I? How did this *I* affect what was happening?

For many years, these comments and many related questions resonated in my head: what part of this self-emerged when I was hanging around in the field, and how did this self-affect what I was told and what I understood? And most seriously, how did my very being there affect, and even *change* things/ideas?

But in those long-ago years, these person-oriented thoughts remained mainly thoughts. There was then still some emphasis on being objective and on the importance of putting aside the personal in the quest for *data*. Focusing too much on the self, it was said, was very much like what psychologists did and could easily lead to what we disparagingly called *navel-gazing*.

However, by the early 1980s, before I began going to Ethiopia, two somewhat different but notable trends affected the discourse of research methods in social anthropology. The first, by then in full bloom, was the discourse of post-modernism, with its strong emphasis on self-consciousness and the importance of subjectivity. Referred to specifically in anthropology as the *reflexive turn*,¹ the buzzword was (and remains) *reflexivity*, the vital importance of identifying and acknowledging the anthropologist’s world and self and the conscious recognition of this self as culturally and emotionally situated. The question now raised is not *whether* but *how* this self affects the perspective of the research and outcome and, perhaps most specifically, how it influences the actual writing of the research.²

The second research trend focused on emotions and emphasized the importance of regarding emotions as cultural or learned phenomena which convey particular and definable *meaning*.³ This approach differed rather drastically from previous views where emotions were understood primarily as *feelings* which were universal and biologically determined. Nowadays, and fortunately I think, there is a move toward combining the two views and in considering feelings and meaning as mutually

¹ See, among others, Clifford and Marcus (1986).

² See Davies (1999) for an elongated ethnographic example of reflexivity in qualitative fieldwork.

³ For a broad ethnographic view of emotions as culturally constructed, see Lutz and Abu-Lughod (1986).

reactive. Leavitt, for one, has argued that emotions are grounded in *both* particular cultural meanings and in universal or biological feelings.⁴ I can readily attest to this fusion of feelings and meaning in my own experience in the field, particularly in the context of the ongoing intense interaction which fieldwork entails.

Moreover—and this is a major consideration in the discussion which follows—both experiencing, expressing, and acknowledging emotions can spontaneously and immediately *connect people*. Lutz is quite on target when she writes that in the fieldwork situation, “[emotions] can provide an idiom for asserting the existence of *bonds between people...*” (Lutz et al., 1990: 19n5).⁵

What I want to add here that these emotional bonds are often more than an *idiom*; they are real, immediate, strong, and close-by, and they can create a bond or a relationship that goes far beyond the specific concerns of the fieldwork. It is precisely the felt or expressed recognition of these emotional actions and *re*-actions on the part of both the anthropologist and the respondent(s) which I want to discuss here—the mutuality of the fieldwork experience. It is this kind of mutuality and the often unexpressed but strongly felt sharing of emotions which I suggest is an important but neglected aspect of qualitative methodology. My point is that the *sharing of emotions* which I experienced in several fieldwork periods affected and/or deepened my understanding of and my relationships with respondents and theirs with me.

It is this often ignored aspect of methodology—the vague but consciously acknowledged shared emotions which I experienced in several fieldwork contexts which I will discuss and describe in the following pages.

Hannerz on Sharing

The kind of *sharing* I refer to is somewhat related to the definition of *culture* suggested by Hannerz. In one path-breaking book which has influenced much of my thinking, Hannerz contends that culture is what “I know that you know that I know” (Hannerz, 1996: 57). Although Hannerz was specifically referring to the meta-shared qualities of culture which occur in larger national or ethnic contexts, I want to argue that his insistence on the *sharedness* of cultural knowledge is possible even in less general, more individually centered contexts, and, moreover, that the sharedness is often mediated by the expression of different but definable emotions. Very often these emotions function as what Spencer (2010: 2) has defined as “vehicles of understanding” and can result what I often experienced as short but strong and meaningful nods.

Although the specifics of the particular emotions—both the biological feelings and cultural meanings—differed in each of the several incidents I will relate, the sharing was primary and meaning-filled and obvious: there was the shared deep sadness in the first incident, some barely controlled anger and shame in a second, a quiet and respectful acknowledgment of human wonder in the third, and the joy and

⁴ For a thorough discussion of this issue, see Leavitt (1996).

⁵ Emphasis of the author.

the quiet pride of accomplishment in the fourth. In each incident, these emotional reactions generated bonds, often silent but often in the form of nods. And the nods, said it all: “I know that you know that I know”.

Dodota: Some Background

The first of three incidents occurred in the fall of 1988 during my first visit to Ethiopia. At the time, I was working with a team—both Swedish and Ethiopian—who had been commissioned to evaluate the Dodota Water Supply Project. The project was designed and financed by Swedish SIDA, and was rather unusual in two ways: first, there was a very strong focus on canvassing and considering local opinions. For several weeks, long before the project design was finalized, women from several villages had been attending focus groups. Their discussions centered on the kinds of projects which would increase *development* in the area. In every session, the several groups totally agreed: “we will never have any development here until we have access to clean water”.

I especially remember a comment made by a rather elderly woman. At one point in a heated discussion, she raised her hand, was recognized by the moderator, slowly stood up, and said very quietly, with deep sadness in her voice: “we don’t even have enough water to wash our dead”.

What was also unusual was that the project itself was eventually to be owned, managed, and implemented by local *women*. This meant that in order to be employed in the project, all potential employees had to attend a three-week training program at ARDU, a SIDA-supported educational training facility in the region of Arssi. The curriculum included instruction in all of the several skills involved in a water system project: how to deal with the mechanics of a gravity-fed system with its many pumps and valves, and how to organize the collection of fees and payments. There was even, I was told, some instruction on how to repair broken pipes. Again, my special task: to collect the views of the so-called water women toward their training.

For several weeks, I and my so-appreciated colleague/translator, Ato Senbetta, traveled to all of the 19 villages in Dodota. We interviewed each of the “water women” in each village and asked (mainly) questions which related to the water system: what did you learn? How and by whom were the skills taught? What kinds of teaching materials did you use? What did you think about the training? Was it useful? Difficult? Once I even dared to ask, quite logically I thought, whether “you had to learn to use a monkey wrench”.

I also wondered, how the women felt about spending so much time at the training center which was rather far from home. Who took care of their families at home? Of their children? What did their husbands think? And why did they think that just they had been chosen?

I want to point out that by the time of our evaluation, in late 1988, the water system had been completed and all the villages in the area were connected.⁶ Now women in the villages did not have to walk a few hours every day to fetch water; they could get clean water from the taps at several water posts in each of the villages. They merely had to walk to the water post and fill their one *insera* or jug with water. The filled *insera* weighed somewhat upwards of twenty kilos, and cost 5 birr, the equivalent then of about 5 US cents. Payment occurred at the water post and was collected by the attending “water woman”. No one that we talked to complained about the price.

The general evaluation touched upon economic and mechanical aspects of the water system, in particular its sustainability, though Ato Senbetta and I concentrated mainly on the education component. We had long meetings with small groups of water women as well as with individuals. Most often, we met inside the women’s homes or in their gardens or at the water taps, and concentrated on the questions I iterated above—their personal views of the training program in which they had all participated (Poluha et al., 1990–91).

We met other people as well, most of whom were more than positive—indeed, they were grateful for the water system. Women would often point out that the water system meant that they no longer had to walk many kilometers, with a heavy *insera* on their backs, to collect water from far-away, often muddy rivers. The water they now could buy was clean and close to home and affordable. Many continued to point out the difference the water system had made on the lives of people in the village—how the clean water affected their children and the general health of everyone in the village.

Only the village nurse had a vaguely critical comment. He privately pointed out to me that “the problem is the hands”. I must have looked skeptical. He then continued to explain: “the children come into the house, stick their hands in the water jug... which immediately pollutes the water. So this is something we still have to do...”.

It often happened that people dropped by as we were talking. I remember, in particular, one elderly woman who interrupted us in the middle of a discussion. She was anxious to tell us about the many good changes she had experienced in her life: “first, I got electricity in my home and, now, I have a faucet with clean water in my own yard!”.⁷

Incident One

The first incident occurred early one morning, just a few minutes before we began our discussions. A small group of “water women” had already gathered in the center square of the village and were ready to begin the day’s discussions, but I saw that one woman whom I had already interviewed had distanced herself from the small

⁶ The government’s village-ization process was by then completed. See Marcus 1994: 188–200.

⁷ Having her own faucet was rather unusual. She was one of the few women who had piped water in her own yard.

group and was walking toward me. When we stood together, she first mentioned that she and I had already talked about the water project, but then she said, almost in a whisper: "...but I must ask you a question ...". Pause. Then: "what do you do in your country when you can't have children?". I waited a long silent minute, then looked at her and quietly answered: "we inform the... and try to ...", but I realized right away that my answer was not helpful. I was now quiet and deeply moved. Then I nodded. My nod said so much—that I shared her concern, that I understood, and that I shared her deep sadness.

Here again, Hannerz's comment on shared knowledge is evident: "I knew that she knew that I knew". And here again, our emotions functioned well as silent but strong *vehicles of understanding*.

Incident Two

This second incident involved very different emotions, not all of which were positive. It occurred in one village rather late one afternoon when Ato Senbetta and I had concluded yet another series of interviews. Now totally exhausted, I was busy packing myself and my notebooks in the huge blue Toyota Landcruiser when I happened to see one of the young women who had trained to be an administrator and had helped us organize our schedule. I called out to her and asked her whether she would like a ride to Huruta, the nearby town which housed the project office. Then I added, quite spontaneously, as it is my habit, "by the way, do you drive?". Not at all good. The woman was silent for a long moment, then she gazed at me and said, very slowly and with very wry tones, "No, (pause)...but all you have to do is teach me".

I cannot reproduce her acid tones nor her hurt, angry look in this paper but I admit that I immediately cringed; her tones and her look indicated so clearly that my question was both insensitive and inappropriate. For several moments, I was both embarrassed and ashamed and quite angry with myself for being so insensitive. Eventually, when I regained some control, I understood what had happened. What she meant with her long silent look and her vaguely sarcastic tone went far beyond the topics we were considering. At that unpleasant moment, we connected and experienced several emotions—anger, some amount of masked fury on her part, and a great deal of childish insensitivity, even shame, on mine (Narrowe, 1989).

Her reaction also made me realize emotionally that our evaluation of the water project involved more than collecting or understanding the ideas of the participating women. The evaluation and most particularly the personal interaction we insisted upon were important triggers which led to expressing and perhaps exchanging some deep-seated ideas and values, very few of which were mentioned in my formal terms of reference but which definitely permeated all our discussions. However much I later learned about "the culture" and "the women of Ethiopia", at that moment we each could agree about the emotions the other felt—her anger and my shame. Later, I very meekly apologized, and she agreed to take my offer of a ride to her office in the nearby town.

Incident Three

This incident occurred in another village in conjunction with another SIDA project which focused on the production and distribution of candles. Once again, as usual concerned with understanding the cultural aspects of education, I was asked to evaluate the project's small-scale training program. So, early one afternoon, Ato Senbetta and I drove to one of the participating villages and organized a visit with some of the women who were involved in the project. We all gathered in the small local meeting hall in the village and began to discuss the pros and cons of the project's training program.

At one point in the middle of the meeting and not at all related to what we were discussing, a youngish woman stood up and, quite out of turn, pointed out very forcefully why the project was so valuable for her. "When we're all sitting here and discussing candles, I'm thinking about my mother ...", she began; "...you never *heard* her and you didn't even *see* her. She just stood near the stove and was totally silent. But (loudly and slowly), *look at me now*; I'm standing up here and discussing this project with *all of you*. This is a *great great* change....". I cannot remember whether we all applauded—maybe we should have—but I find no references to applause in my notes. No doubt, in the context of an evaluation, such a personal statement was unusual and maybe even embarrassing, and applauding would have been out of character. Yet I silently applauded; I could both feel and share her emotion, her pride, and her open acknowledgment of a new kind of self, a bit powerful and assertive. Again, we both nodded: "she knew that I knew that she knew".

In each of these three incidents, I indicated as clearly as I could that I shared some feelings with the women involved—my deep sadness in the first, my shame in the second, and my respect for newly found pride in the third. For these very intense and important moments, my strong feelings or emotions prevailed; I was very aware that we shared some important part of each other's personal and personalized world. Once again, I return to Hannerz and the importance of shared knowledge—here, most specifically acknowledged by shared though barely expressed emotions.

KCTE and Sharing

I now move to sharing in a very different context. The year was 2000 and I and my college in Sweden had recently established official contact with the Kotebe College of Teacher Education (KCTE) in Addis Ababa. At an early stage, I had been asked to hold a series of introductory lectures on social anthropology. Eventually, I also organized a teacher—and student—exchange program between my college and the KCTE. Both these activities—my formal connection with the college and the appearance of increased numbers of female students at my anthropology lectures whetted my interest in the Ethiopian government's formal policy with regard to gender and

education. The policy was a form of affirmative action and permitted young women to enter institutions of higher learning with lower marks than men.

I wondered whether and how it was working and whether it in fact had led to an increase in the numbers of women in educational institutions. Thus, in 2002, I applied for and subsequently received a two-year Swedish government grant to explore the policy and find out how it was experienced and understood by some of its major targets—the young male and female student—teachers, the teachers and administrators at the college.⁸

Once again, I openly and consciously utilized participant observation as my main method to collect the data: endless hanging around, many informal often spontaneous discussions, several formal focus groups, many life stories, and some visuals. My question was always whether and how the new policy was working at the college and what the change might mean for the college, the teachers and for both male and female students.

Incident One

I begin first with two mini-incidents, both of which occurred in the sweltering hot lecture hall shortly after one of my lectures in social anthropology. With my usual enthusiasm, I had just spoken about what we mean by ethnography and had emphasized the importance of fieldwork, personal interaction, and participatory methods. A few moments after I finished, one student found her way to me through the crowds of students and was quite visibly critical, even upset. “Thanks very much for the lecture Dr. Judi but... I really think that anthropology is such an *intrusive* science. So... *invasive, so into people’s lives*. How do you deal with it? And how can they deal with you *always being there*?”⁹ Another student interrupted. “I also want to say something, Dr. Judi. You talked about how culture is learned and changes and the importance of identifying culture change. Ok but I think it’s very important to say that *it’s not so easy*. It doesn’t just happen. We need to be aware that (*slowly*) ... *the culture is heavy*”. I nodded. They were right on both accounts. I quickly agreed and included their comments in my notes and have quoted them for many years.

⁸ Johannes Fabian (1990) has suggested that anthropological fieldwork provides an “occasion” for thinking. While I agree that fieldwork creates an occasion I find the concept of *trigger* more useful; it acknowledges that the process has begun. The constant movement, action, and most often re-action which characterizes participation observation.

⁹ Emphasis hers.

Incident Two

My months of participating and observing at the college included many moments and many levels of sharing. The following incident was especially important for me and for us.

It occurred on the wooded college campus on a dark, very clear night; the stars were brilliant—tremendously heavy and almost close enough to touch. I had just met a small group of women students who were walking from the student lounge back to their dorms and we chatted informally about the day's activities. Somewhere on the path, the girls stopped, waited a moment, then turned to me and asked me whether I believed in God. I hesitated, thought a while, turned toward the girls, and answered very slowly and quietly as best I could: "God... (pause) for me is a great power, a creator, a source of energy...". I was aware that my belief or definition most probably did not correspond with theirs, but at that quiet moment, that was not relevant. I was more aware of our common human concerns and questions, though perhaps not the answer. They nodded, and I nodded back. Then we quietly walked a bit farther and disbanded—they, to their dorms and I, to my small house on the campus. I immediately took out my notebook and wrote how grateful I was to them, both for asking me and then for our wordless deep sharing. Once again, I experienced the power of emotions as vaguely tangible *vehicles of understanding*.

Incident Three

Incident is too narrow a term to describe the context and the emotion in what follows. It was more specifically a kind of happening and an important conclusion to my study. It occurred at the close of a long period of intense fieldwork and included the final theoretical analysis of one of my most devoted and concerned respondents, as well as friend and colleague.

For some months, when we began to do our work, he and I had focused very specifically on the Ethiopian government's gender policy which permitted women students to enter institutions of higher learning with fewer points than men. To collect opinions, he and I interviewed many students—both men and women from all parts of Ethiopia. Most students politely approved of the policy, though they often indicated that it might be difficult to put into practice. Some women students said, very bluntly, that "we wouldn't be here if it weren't for that policy". Others, both men and women, strongly disapproved of the policy. Their point was that "it's unjust and defines women as somewhat inferior and/or weaker than men".

My friend-colleague-respondent accepted the latter critique but admitted privately to me that he thought the policy was important but difficult: "it is true that girls *do* have more to do at home, they *do* have less time to study; that is the culture". For weeks, we focused on the "culture" and what it might be for various individuals in this context. But as time went on and our discussions deepened, I understood

Table 1 Perceptions of modernity and tradition in Ethiopia by one of the respondents

The issues	Zemanawi (modernity) A	Zemanawi (Ethiopian modernity) B	Bahelawi (tradition) C
Dressing	Accept all fashion whether it is in the culture or not without question, ex mini-skirts and tights	Accept some dressing styles borrowed from abroad but s/he modifies jeans	Does not accept any dressing mode other than our own, ex <i>shamma</i> ; no information or opportunity
Boy-girl relationship	Completely free, open, because no fear of the norm; sex before marriage, may or may not use condoms	Free but according to the religion (EOC), no sex before marriage; can discuss many things, even sex in a gentle religious manner. <i>To discuss is modern and comes from the West</i>	It is shameful to discuss with a girl unless you are married
Religion	Can be change or reform, ex church hymns and musical instruments	Never change or reform, e.g., church hymns and musical instruments	Never change or reform hymns or musical instruments (<i>yaredawi zema</i>)
Technology	Videos, computers, everything	Selective	Reject everything
Other cultures	Eat European style, eat from your own dish	Eat together and share food from the same dish. This is important!	Eat together from the same dish

that his real concern—and now often the subject of many of our discussions—was “modernity”, both what it might mean in Ethiopia and how this policy and other development policies promoted “modernity”. One comment he made several times and with a great deal of feeling: “we are not beggar Ethiopia, Judi”, and then, he almost passionately added that “we must define this concept ourselves, in the context of what we do here and who we are...”. I quickly prodded him on: “... so how do you see it? The process of modernity in Ethiopia?”. At once, he proceeded to show me a sketch of his views. I reproduce his sketch here in its entirety (Table 1).

He continued, now concentrating on the essence of his argument: “You see it right here, Dr. Judi, [...] the important mixed category, *Zemanawi B*. For example, I oppose the *Bahelawi* approach that forces girls to be married to a person who is not loved and may not even be known by her. But I do appreciate the position that you *choose* because of love”.¹⁰ He continued: “An early old idea was that a woman does not choose her husband. The new idea is that she can *choose*. The change comes through a process, through the government—though not very much—and it comes from modern education...”. “Modern”, “the process of change”, “education”, “choice”, I nodded and proceeded to ask him some pointed questions about his sketch

¹⁰ Emphasis his.

(Narrowe, 2006). I also thanked him profusely, both for his work and devotion, and because he *shared* his moment of insight and creativity with me.

In each of the incidents I relate here, I both acted and *re-acted* spontaneously with some amount of clearly felt emotion. And in each I was met by an immediate and understandable emotional response which was always tangible, though not always positive. While I'm not sure we *bonded*—it might be that Lutz's "bonded" is too strong a term—there is little doubt that we *shared* some emotions—sadness, anger, shame, pride. In each incident, our emotions acted as *vehicles* that in some way, indicated that we were *inter-acting*; we were *sharing* some feeling or idea which was very basic and very real, something that "I knew that you knew that I knew". What also happened, at least sometimes, was that we *said* all this with barely perceptible *nods*.

No doubt we can logically ask: why are these emotions—particularly the nodding and sharing incidents I have described above—important when discussing research methods in Africa? I return to what we were taught many years ago in our introductory methodology courses: "the researcher her or himself is the main research tool". In each of my experiences in Ethiopia—the evaluations in Dodota and elsewhere, and the longer fieldwork in the teacher's college, I participated as a *whole person* on many levels—intellectual and emotional. In doing so, I acknowledged the humanity of myself as well as the selves of the respondents. Perhaps this is what is meant by inter-active participation—acknowledging mutual connections or a form of emotional engagement with those we meet during fieldwork.

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Rethinking Periodisations

Which Middle Ages for Ethiopia?



Alessandro Bausi

Abstract Current debates on the notion of Middle Ages of Ethiopia (and Eritrea) offer the occasion for reflecting on periodizations proposed as well as on recent trends which tend to neglect essential phases of the history of studies. The wave of studies on Late Antiquity has marginally impacted the studies on Ethiopian past.

I offer with utmost gratitude this short note of reflections to Irma Taddia, to whom I owe the opportunity of the unforgettable and decisive experience of several field research campaigns in the Eritrean highlands in the 1990s, over thirty years ago, within the framework of a research project devised and directed by her. To those campaigns and therefore to Irma, I still feel profoundly indebted for what that experience meant and still means to me, both as a researcher and as a man. The research was funded by the Italian CNR (Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche) through the project *Materiali rilevanti per l'Etiopia dell'800* of the Dipartimento di Discipline Storiche e dell'Ateneo dell'Università degli Studi di Bologna. For some reports and the outcomes, see Bausi et al. (1993), Bausi et al. (1995), Bausi et al. (2001), Bausi (2001).

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A. Bausi (✉)
Sapienza Università di Roma, Rome, Italy
e-mail: alessandro.bausi@uniroma1.it

These remain in the large majority indifferent to the change of paradigm that the late antique turn of the last decades requires and imposes, even though impressive discoveries have revealed ancient Ethiopia's participation and entanglement within a larger ecumene. On the contrary, recent nationalistic trends tend to flatten Ethiopian past projecting backward the living tradition of the present and stressing its unicity, whereas the present tradition has evolved and retained it only to a limited extent. Actually, large portions of this past, committed to rare manuscripts, are vanished, forgotten, and actually ignored. A correct re-appreciation of Ethiopian past has to restart from the approaches which have located Ethiopia within a broader context, even before the discoveries which have marked the last decades. Among the scholars who were pioneers in this approach, Enrico Cerulli needs to be re-evaluated in his own right for what he wrote in his works.

Keywords Ethiopian and Eritrean history · Ethiopian and Eritrean periodization · Ethiopian and Eritrean Late Antiquity · Ethiopia and Eritrean Middle Ages · Global Middle Ages

If we were to credit Tubiana (1965: 162) with some reliability, we should not talk of Ethiopian Middle Ages, Since in one of the very few, to my knowledge, contributions on the periodization of Ethiopian history in 1965, he clearly stated

The three main divisions of European history are, roughly speaking: Ancient History, The Middle Ages, Modern Times. It would not be irrelevant to call certain parts of Ethiopian history, Modern Times, or, Ancient Times, but such periods would not cover the same lapse of time, neither the same historical reality, as in European history. Moreover, it would be nothing else than illusion or laziness that could lead one to speak of Ethiopian "Middle Ages". There is not much in common between the European Middle Ages and any part of Ethiopian history. It is not sound to approach the problems of Ethiopian history, or African history at large, with conscious or unconscious Europaeocentrism.

Tubiana went on by singling out turning points ("an event more or less arbitrarily chosen among a sequence of events leading to a completely new state of things, and such that no return is possible, back to the former state of things") and came up with the following proposal (according to a simplified schema), without ignoring that "[i]t is apparent that at least for pedagogical reasons we have to pick up arbitrarily one date, and one event, to symbolise the complete course of events leading to the new historical situation" (*ibidem*), that "[o]ne easily understands then that the problem is of less import to the researcher than to the teacher" (Tubiana, 1965: 163), and that the issue of the curriculum, academic status, and the ideal, or minimum, syllabus and required competences, impacting academic traditions and their constraints, has a place in this discussion. Very trivially, is it acceptable that a historian cannot master the classical language? Which other languages are ideally required? What do we do with Latin? And Greek, Arabic, Coptic, Syriac, South Arabian? And Amharic, of course? And other Ethiopian languages? And the European non-English contributions in the field?

Yet, Tubiana came up with a periodization in four main periods: (1) "Ancient Period" (Antiquity, from the first millennium BCE to the end of the tenth century

CE)¹; (2) “Agaw Period” (eleventh to thirteenth centuries)²; (3) “Third Period” or “The Period of the Amhara Kingdom” (1270–1868); and (4) the “Fourth Period” or “Modern Times” (1869 to Ḥayla Śəllāse)³—with the third further subdivided into three, as follows: (3.1) “Shoan Kingdom” (1270–1543); (3.2) “Gondar Kingdom” (from the Oromo invasion to 1769); (3.3) “The Government of the Rases” (1769 to Tewodros II) (Tubiana, 1965: 165).

This model is still largely followed. I remember not many years ago at an international conference an outstanding contemporary Ethiopian historian still commending Sergew Hable Sellasie’s (1972) one shot *Ancient and Medieval Ethiopian History to 1270* and the schema tacitly holds in Tadesse Tamrat’s (1972) classic *Church and State in Ethiopia 1270–1527*; an idea, in the end, also resumed in Phillipson’s (2012) *Foundations of an African Civilisation: Aksum and the Northern Horn 1000 BC–AD 1300*, that privileges archaeological evidence. And Tubiana’s “Agaw Period” coincides with the once called Zāgʷe period in Derat’s (2018) recent monograph, *L’énigme d’une dynastie sainte et usurpatrice dans le royaume chrétien d’Éthiopie du x^e au xiii^e siècle*.⁴ And yet, recent archaeological evidence providing a completely new scenario of the Islamic-Christian relations has received due attention in a synthetic work only in the volume edited by Kelly (2020a), *A Companion to Medieval Ethiopia and Eritrea*,⁵ and more contributions are to come.

Tubiana’s proposal of one single Ancient Period includes the South Arabian phase, the pre-Aksumite, and the entire Aksumite period until the end of the tenth century, although conceding that inside the first period the major *turning point* is the conversion of the King of Aksum ‘Ezānā to Christianity in the first half of the fourth century. His proposal dates from Ḥayla Śəllāse’s times and misses completely the essential late antique turn.⁶ The trend was early caught also by the “Ethiopian monastic holy man” focused by Kaplan (1984; see also Robin, 2012), and later received in Munro-Hay’s (1991) *Aksum: An African Civilisation of Late Antiquity*, and the unfortunately less accessible, but also fruitful synthesis on Aksum and beyond by Brakmann’s (1994) *Τὸ πρὸ τῶς βαρβάρους ἔργον θεῶν. Die Einwurzelung der Kirche im spätantiken Reich von Aksum*. I would add to these also the posthumous book on late antique Ethiopia by Marrassini (2014), *Storia e leggenda dell’Etiopia tardoantica. Le iscrizioni reali aksumite*, that focuses Aksumite history and royal inscriptions, but also in the light of the later tradition.

¹ “Ethiopian civilisation, considered as a complex of Semitic (South Arabian) and African (perhaps Wiltonian) elements, began when the impact of Semitic immigration was strong enough to produce some changes” (Tubiana, 1965: 163).

² Instead of “Dark Age” (Zagʷe Period, marked by “insurrection of the Falasa, who are Agaw, and the appearance of the Lasta Kingdom”; starts at the “end of the Xth century (fall of Aksum) and ends in the year 1270, with the resurgence of the Solomonid dynasty” (Tubiana, 1965: 164).

³ Yohānnēs IV, Mənilək II, Ḥayla Śəllāse (*ibidem*).

⁴ On which see also Bausi (2018a).

⁵ Originally planned in the Brill series of the “Companions to European History”. Kaplan (forthcoming) has carried out a broader and thoughtful reflection on Ethiopian history periodization in a forthcoming publication, which I am grateful he let me read in advance.

⁶ See the decisive Brown (1971); and for some reflections decades later, Giardina (1999).

The question is well posed, lastly, in a dense 2019 contribution by Akbari (2019) which can serve as a basis for reflecting how Ethiopia has been or can be further embedded and encompassed in *global (medieval or non-medieval) perspectives*.⁷ She talks of three ways in which Ethiopian Middle Ages (whatever we want to understand under this label for the moment) can fertilize medieval studies (Akbari, 2019: 92):

Yet the region is of vital importance to the field of medieval studies in three ways: first, in terms of our paradigm of the premodern past; second, in terms of how Western fantasies of Ethiopia, Africa, and blackness itself have shaped modern assumptions, both popular and scholarly; and third, in terms of how those assumptions have given out signals, often subtle, concerning who belongs in the field and who might not.

The issues of the perception and representations of Ethiopia (as an “essentialized” entity and as “the object of the medieval Western gaze” [Akbari, 2019: 89]), and even of the presence of and interaction with Ethiopians (interweaving of received, literary, and new traditions, on Ethiopia and India, Ethiopians as imagination, myths of Prester John and Queen of Sheba) is a relatively simple one: all this comes under the label of *the Ethiopia of the Middle Ages*. It has to do with establishing an absolute synchronism with medieval history as currently practiced by medievalists in the narrow sense, that is, what happened between Ethiopia and Europe in particular, which was the discourse on Ethiopia and related areas (India, for example) during the centuries of the clearly defined European Middle Ages. This has always to some extent been part of the game in Ethiopian studies, even though new themes arise and role and impact of diasporic presence, trades, and exchanges, need to be assessed again, at times with great new results, in the light of new evidence.⁸ New syntheses are expected, and from time to time we are also faced with surprising new evidence—see for example in the case of the debated passage on an early century Ethiopian embassy to Europe in Giacomo Filippo Foresti’s *Supplementum cronicarum* (first edited in 1483) that a medievalist of the caliber of Paolo Chiesa has definitely demonstrated goes back to the much earlier section of the *Ystoria Etyopie* in Galvaneus de la Flamma’s (d. c. 1345) *Cronica universalis*, drawing on a *Tractatus de mappa Ianuensi* composed by Giovanni da Carignano (d. c. 1330) (Bausi & Chiesa, 2019; Chiesa, 2018).⁹

Conversely, concerning the global approaches, as Akbari (2019: 90) rightly puts it, on the one hand, “the whole forest makes it impossible to see the trees,” and on the other hand, the Middle Ages becomes an abstract typological universal, narrowed down to categories out of any historical context, like feudalism, chivalry, and, even, manuscript culture.

Examples of such approaches are innumerable—let’s just quote, among the more history-oriented ones, some in which scholars from Ethiopian studies have been involved, like the *Stories of Globalisation: The Red Sea and the Persian Gulf from*

⁷ For the framework, see also Akbari et al. (2017), Akbari (2017).

⁸ Most recent contribution by Krebs (2021), but see already Salvatore (2017). On Kelly (2020a), and Krebs (2021) see now the enthusiastic review by Peter Brown, *The Glories of Aksum: Recent Studies of Medieval Ethiopia are a Timely Reminder of a Christianity Wider than Europe*, “The New York Review of Books”, 7 October 2021.

⁹ See also the fascinating Chiesa (2023).

Late Prehistory to Early Modernity (Manzo et al., 2018) or the recent *A Companion to the Global Early Middle Ages* with a valuable chapter by Hatke (2020) on Ethiopia (a “Dark Age,” but with question mark, up to c. the tenth century) and Nubia; and for the African scope see the best seller by Fauvelle (2014, 2017, 2018), *Le rhinocéros d’or*, and the reflections by Derat (2020), some of which anticipated already in contributions by Hirsch (2010, 2015).

The field of *manuscript cultures* is continuously expanding, so that I will not mention here several projects and publications also from my Universität Hamburg (now “University of Hamburg”),¹⁰ but I will refer to this trend as represented, for example, by *World Philology* (Pollock et al., 2015) and *Canonical Texts and Scholarly Practices: a Global Comparative Approach* (Grafton & Most, 2016).¹¹ But these are all initiatives and approaches where *typological comparison* assuming as starting point the material culture of pre-modern, pre-colonial societies, borders on *hypotheses of historical connections*, and we should expect that time and results will decide where to draw the line, from case to case. Within these global approaches we should not forget that the *global Middle Ages* artistically evoked by Pier Paolo Pasolini reserved a place of honor to Ethiopia and Eritrea along a continuum from *the global Middle Ages* into *the modern global South* (Trento, 2010, 2012). Yet, for the Ethiopian manuscript cultures—a still living manuscript culture—let’s always consider the *caveat* that no unsupported backward projection into the past of practices we observe today is justified; the uninterrupted tradition claimed by Ethiopian religious institutions is far from being ascertained, and the development of the Ethiopian (and Eritrean) manuscript cultures is studded with gaps and breaks.¹² I will expand briefly on this point that preludes to the essential cultural continuities. We are then back to the topic whether we can single out not the *Ethiopia of the Middle Ages*, but the *Middle Ages of Ethiopia*, that is, what Carlo Conti Rossini called “l’età di mezzo” (Conti Rossini, 1922).

As Akbari (2019: 90) recalls, the Middle Ages are academically a concept rooted in Latin Christian Europe, where the heritage of Rome, the Holy Roman Empire, and the “national powers that explicitly defined themselves relative both to Rome and to its successor empire under Charlemagne” are central; and only few institutions engaged in medieval studies, like the University of Toronto’s Centre for Medieval Studies (at variance with Toronto’s Pontifical Institute) since its foundation, have cultivated, *within medieval studies*, Arabic and Persian history and literature as well as Latin and Western vernacular languages, so that “the definition of the discipline a half century ago was already more capacious than we might expect.” In fact, if we change perspective and we look at oriental studies, well beyond the Saidian prejudice (Said, 1978)—in my view—toward orientalism (a concept we have again

¹⁰ See in particular the publications of the Hiob Ludolf Centre for Ethiopian and Eritrean Studies, and more broadly of the Centre for the Study of Manuscript Cultures.

¹¹ But see also the ongoing initiative for a *Lexicon of Philological Practices*, promoted by Anne Eusterschulte, Martin Kern, and Glenn Most, and the Toronto initiative on *The Book and the Silk Roads*.

¹² For a couple of impressive examples, see Bausi (2021a, 2021b).

to rethink and re-evaluate), not a few of the so-called orientalists *were always well aware of the complementarity* of their studies with European Middle Ages; that is, that medieval history, literature, and culture as cultivated by European medievalists had a much larger scope than medieval Europe, and could be actually comprehended and understood, also for what non-European (and non-Mediterranean in the narrow sense) evidence could contribute, only within a broader, if not even global scope. I will give here in a moment an example from a master of Ethiopian studies like Enrico Cerulli (1898–1988), although others as well could fit in from the field.

Over ten years ago, Mallette (2010: 132–61) has drawn international attention to this complex figure of orientalist (Celli, 2013a: 19–69, 2013b; Giorgi, 2012; Lusini, 2017).¹³ A pre-fascist colonial officer with a genuine interest for the people and cultures of the Horn of Africa dating from the early 1920s, Cerulli contributed scholarship on Somali and Somalian history, local Semitic and non-Semitic cultures and languages—the monograph he published in his early twenties still remains a milestone in Oromo studies (Cerulli, 1922)—as fundamental as are his studies on Ethiopian literature in connection with European medieval literatures. The best-known case—one among many ranging from Dante and Islam to much less known topics—is that of the *Miracles of Mary* (Cerulli, 1943). Never a racist in his writings, at variance with Carlo Conti Rossini, although obviously compromised with the fascist regime,¹⁴ Cerulli is too complex a figure to be disposed of with few words on this occasion, but he is strongly emblematic for the topic I deal with here. The *damnatio memoriae* which some have invoked on his contributions is not justified by its contents—I talk of the works and not of the man. In the late 1950s, Cerulli was the re-founder of an international community of Ethiopianists and theorized a global approach to Ethiopian history, as he stressed in his proclusion to the First International Conference of Ethiopian Studies (Convegno Internazionale di Studi Etiopici), *Punti di vista sulla storia dell’Etiopia* (Cerulli, 1960),¹⁵ as well as in his *La letteratura etiopica*, the third edition of which coupled with an essay titled *L’oriente cristiano nell’unità delle sue tradizioni* (Cerulli, 1968).

In the methodological contribution, *La littérature éthiopienne dans l’histoire de la culture médiévale* Cerulli (1954–1957: 17–20) wrote that a proper consideration of Ethiopian literature, within the history of medieval culture, should avoid two serious consequences, both deriving—since Ethiopian studies restarted in the nineteenth century—from the expectation that the Ethiopian literature, *ancilla theologiae* (“in the service of theology”), should only deliver new witnesses on religious history: on

¹³ See also Bausi (2016: 193–194) for further references on Italian orientalism.

¹⁴ Recently De Lorenzi (2018) has penned an informative article on his law case and objective responsibilities in the late 1930s. Less consistently imperialistic was Cerulli’s view of Italian role in the Africa Orientale Italiana (AOI) according to Podestà (2013: 69–70): Cerulli’s considerations on the administration of the AOI were “dettate dal buon senso e dall’esperienza empirica di circa quattro anni di governo dell’AOI, ma erano in palese contraddizione con la politica totalitaria del regime e con l’idealizzazione simbolica dell’impero come mito” (Podestà, 2013: 70).

¹⁵ It is also available in English, Cerulli (2012); partly republished along several essays on East and West in the Middle Ages in Cerulli (1971: 59–65); see in particular Cerulli (1957a), republished in Cerulli (1971: 67–80).

the one hand, scholars looked only at translation literature, and religious literature in particular, disregarding the importance and value of original Ethiopian literature per se; on the other hand, consideration of this literature per se has restricted the discipline to few specialists confined to the African horizon (“l’«africanisme»”), whereas there are hardly other fields of oriental studies where cultural contacts and exchanges have been more complex and varied than in the Ethiopian area (Cerulli, 1954–1957: 17–18):

Ainsi, pour l’éthiopien, peut-être à cause d’un reste de méfiance demeuré dans la mémoire des savants, on a presque généralement admis l’idée qu’il s’agissait, après tout, d’un domaine à réserver aux spécialistes, un secteur d’études dont il n’y avait à tirer que des données d’ordre et d’importance locale, et on a fini parfois par classer les études éthiopiennes dans la zone, aux limites un peu vagues, de l’«africanisme». Or, en fait, il y a — au contraire — très peu de secteurs de l’orientalisme où les contacts avec les autres cultures ont eu une valeur déterminante plus grande que le secteur éthiopien; et il y a encore peu de secteurs de l’orientalisme où les contacts et les échanges culturels ont été plus complexes et variés. Je vous en parlerai, donc, en me plaçant au point de vue de l’histoire générale et en amenant devant vous cette question fondamentale: Qu’est-ce-que l’étude de la littérature éthiopienne peut nous dire d’utile pour l’histoire culturelle? Et mon discours portera ce soir, particulièrement, sur l’histoire du Moyen Âge, depuis les débuts de la littérature chrétienne en Éthiopie jusqu’au xvi^e siècle.¹⁶

Presenting the case of an apocryphal Marian legend on the *Covenant of Mercy*, Cerulli observes that, as frequently happens, the date of one of the Ethiopian versions, translated on a Greek Byzantine model and transmitted within a multiple-text manuscript of the *Miracles of Mary*, antedates by centuries that of the Greek manuscripts (or manuscripts of other versions) which attest it; and that of course the text must be reconstructed according to modern philological methods, in order to take into account the *variations* which the *scriptoria* have introduced in the ancient version: a still valid *memento* for the *new philologists* who are very fond of textual *mouvance et variantes*, but who are generally reluctant to consider that there are rules determined by the materiality itself of the textual transmission which determine primary and secondary readings, which we have to distinguish in order to build on them reliable hypotheses on the possible intention attributed to the single variations; and also to understand correctly the past, that is, *which are the roots* of the Ethiopian literary tradition (Bausi, 2020a, 2020b).

¹⁶ “Thus, for Ethiopian studies, perhaps because of a residue of mistrust that has remained in the memory of scholars, it was almost generally accepted that this was, after all, a field to be reserved for specialists, a sector of study from which only data of local order and importance could be drawn, and Ethiopian studies sometimes ended up being classified in the somewhat vague zone of ‘Africanism’. In fact, there are—on the contrary—very few sectors of Orientalism where contacts with other cultures have been of greater determining value than the Ethiopian sector; and there are still few sectors of Orientalism where cultural contacts and exchanges have been more complex and varied. I will speak to you, therefore, from the point of view of general history and bring before you this fundamental question: what can the study of Ethiopian literature tell us that is useful for cultural history? And my talk tonight will focus on the history of the Middle Ages, from the beginnings of Christian literature in Ethiopia to the sixteenth century.” Translation by the author.

Cerulli applies here a principle that has demonstrated all its validity in the light of the recent discovery of new documentation. This the case, which I have had the opportunity to highlight in some publications, of the *Aksumite Collection*, a remarkable manuscript, certainly among the earliest non-biblical Ethiopic manuscripts preserved so far, that transmits a peculiar collection of early texts, in all likelihood translated from the Greek in the Aksumite period.¹⁷ As assumed by Cerulli, multiple-text manuscripts (MTMs) come to embed, in the earliest extant (medieval) manuscript tradition (from the thirteenth/fourteenth century), redactions and also fragmentary textual forms produced centuries before, usually before the eighth century at the latest, of which we rarely happen to find direct witnesses, like in the very special case of the *Aksumite Collection*, be it a phenomenon of Aksumite revival or of preservation (Bausi, 2019). But in the course of time, parallel newly translated and revised redactions circulated and became more prominent, also in the form of single-text manuscript, like in this case examined by Cerulli of the *Dormition of Mary*, to the point that they became the standard texts received by the tradition, and were included in the twentieth century in printed editions of the *Miracles of Mary*, and recognized by the church authorities as representative of a tradition venerable for its antiquity (Cerulli, 1954–1957; 18–20, 1957b). As to what consideration we have to do of this tradition and editions I will not deal here, but some brief essays are eloquent that the earliest attainable tradition is largely out of reach of the present church teaching (Bausi, 2021b, 2024a).

What mostly strikes in this process is the lack of documentation and understanding we have of the transition from the Aksumite to the relatively much better documented period starting from the thirteenth century. Yet, the common notion of *the Middle Ages of Ethiopia* largely disregards the centuries of Late Antiquity and beyond, and typically focuses most of the attention on the Solomonic phase, which is chronologically confined to a few centuries marked by the massive impact of the Copto-Arabic heritage (responsible for what I call the “Ignazio Guidi paradigm of Ethiopian literature” [Bausi, 2024a]), which mark one of the real turning points in Ethiopian history; or the common notion of *the Middle Ages of Ethiopia* even farther extends this very late phase to the sixteenth century, if not also including the so-called Gondarine period. This fourteenth–sixteenth century Ethiopia represents the common notion of medieval Ethiopia. Yet, a marking feature of Ethiopian historical periodization is precisely the peripheral, isolate persistence of a late antique heritage in sub-Saharan Africa—see for example the astonishing connection of Ethiopian texts with late antique or early medieval Latin manuscripts from the Veronese Biblioteca Capitolare—before the Solomonic period (Bausi, 2024b) or the possible connections of twelfth-century documentary practices with the Mediterranean world (Bausi, 2023).

What and how from the Aksumite and late antique times remained or was revived and restructured in later times, Solomonic or rather earlier, is one of the main issues to investigate in the history of Ethiopia: this applies to texts, hagiographic traditions, art history, as well as to the kind of historical memories gathered in later times, like the so-called kings’ lists, which not rarely happen to preserve ancient evidence

¹⁷ See a recently published joint article, Bausi et al. (2020).

(Bausi, 2018b; Derat, 2019). No need to say, all this is hindered by the scarcity of textual evidence and the limited archaeological investigation undertaken so far. Without disregarding the synchronisms and outer connections, it is around the internal evidence of continuities and discontinuities, and homogenous cultural phases, that the scholars in Ethiopian studies have to deal with Ethiopian history and critically make their suggestions and hypotheses—as Cerulli did when singling out an *oriente cristiano nell'unità delle sue tradizioni*, followed by similar enterprises, such as the conference on *L'Oriente Cristiano nella storia della Civiltà*.¹⁸ I would have no reservation in calling this period *Middle Ages*, once we have made clear what we mean by this, and that it matches to a very limited extent the European Middle Ages and only by synchronism the all-encompassing global Middle Ages (Akbari, 2019: 89–92; Kelly, 2020b: 16–19).¹⁹

Looking beyond the debate of the role either the fall of Constantinople (1453) or the growing Humanism as a phase distinct from the Renaissance, or later, Protestantism and Reformation had in defining the concept and period of Middle Ages,²⁰ we can also think if notions related to the Middle Ages are more generally useful also for understanding Ethiopian history and culture. One could wonder for example who could represent Reformation, either Zar'a Yā'qob or the 'Ēstifānosites; or whether Zar'a Yā'qob and his intellectuals *kāhənāta dabtārā* represent the Humanism and the recovery, but also the filtering and deletion, of an Aksumite past; or if this interest for the past is anticipated already by Giyorgis of Saglā; or even by the Zāg'we, who would represent some continuity and revival of the Aksumite past. Another topic would be to understand which is the periodization presupposed by the Ethiopian historiography, all the more since we know that episodes of Ethiopian past were accessible to Ethiopian intellectuals only via secondary sources—the best-known cases is that of the sixth-century persecution of Naḡrān and Kāleb's expedition to Ḥimyar, which the later medieval tradition only knows from secondary sources of Arabic provenance, as emerges in the account reported by Biondo Flavio of the meeting with the Ethiopian delegation in 1441 (Bouloux, 2017; Kelly, 2017).

Finally, since the heritage of the past survives in the present as a still living culture, the creation of the common understanding of its development might entail negotiations and post-colonial issues—both in religious and lay institutions—about which we must be very careful. *Amicus Plato, sed magis amica veritas*: research must be respectful, but, in the end, free.²¹

¹⁸ On this see *Atti del Convegno Internazionale sul tema: L'Oriente Cristiano nella storia della Civiltà (Roma 31 Marzo–3 Aprile 1963) (Firenze 4 aprile 1963)*, Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, Rome, 1964.

¹⁹ For the Islamic world, see Hirschler and Savant (2014).

²⁰ See on this, as a classic in the national Italian scenario, Falco (1933, 1977).

²¹ See, for some quite alarming positions, Yirga Gelaw Woldeyes (2017, 2020a, 2020b), and the right rejoinder, Kleiner (2022).

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Ousanas: A Ruler at the Crossroads of Aksum's History (*RIÉ* 186 = *DAE* 8)



Gianfrancesco Lusini

Abstract A fresh reading of the inscription *RIÉ* 186 = *DAE* 8, attributed to Ousanas *bisi gisene*, King of Aksum, elder brother and predecessor of the renowned 'Ezana—allows for the proposal of a new hypothesis regarding the emergence of Christianity in the Ethiopian royal court. Contrary to the simplistic explanation of a ruler converting from polytheism to Christianity, one may observe how the monotheistic sensitivity of the Aksumite dynasty instead affirmed itself progressively, as the result of an internal debate, first manifesting itself in the henotheistic claim of Maḥrēm's primacy among the gods of the Ethiopian pantheon. Furthermore, an analysis of the personal and place names found in the same inscription leads to some innovative conclusions about the distribution of languages and cultures in the Kingdom of Aksum.

Keywords Kingdom of Aksum · Ousanas · 'Ezana · Maḥrēm · Henotheism

Marking the completion of the ambitious project conceived of thirty years ago, the publication of the last volume of the *Recueil des inscriptions de l'Éthiopie des périodes pré-axoumite et axoumite* (Drewes, 2019) provides us with a valuable and up-to-date tool for the reading of documentary sources related to the ancient history of Eritrea and Ethiopia.¹ Similar to *Storia e leggenda dell'Etiopia tardoantica*—the work of the Florentine Ethiopist Paolo Marrassini (1942–2013) which, after his death, was brought to press with skill and sensitivity by Alessandro Bausi (Marrassini, 2014)—this volume is also a *Lebenswerk*. It bears the name of the great Dutch scholar

¹ A number of remarks and specific observations about this work can be found in the well-balanced review of Gajda (2022).

The abbreviations refer to: *DAE* 8 = Littmann (1913), *Sabäische, griechische und altabessinische Inschriften*, Deutsche Aksum-Expedition IV, Reimer, Berlin, inscription no. 8; *RIÉ* 186 = Bernard and Drewes (1991), *Recueil des inscriptions de l'Éthiopie des périodes pré-axoumite et axoumite – Tome I. Les documents – Tome II. Les planches*, Diffusion De Boccard, Paris, inscription no. 186.

G. Lusini (✉)
Università di Napoli L'Orientale, Naples, Italy
e-mail: glusini@unior.it

Abraham Johannes Drewes (1927–2007) and has been published sometime after his death by virtue of Manfred Kropp's editorial and Harry Stroomer's publishing efforts.

The volume contains a wealth of data and interpretations destined to have a profound impact on the progress of studies, particularly concerning those most relevant sources, in terms of type and scope, namely the great royal inscriptions of the rulers of Aksum from the fourth through the sixth century: from Ousanas to 'Ezana; from Kaleb to W'ZB (Drewes, 2019: 195–285, 459–516). Here, I am pleased to recall how my first visit to the capital of the largest African kingdom of late antiquity took place in 1992, on the initiative of the dedicatee of this volume, who involved Alessandro Bausi and me, scholars-in-training at the time, in her field research in Eritrea. I offer Irma the following pages as a belated but tangible thanks for that invaluable personal experience, hoping she may welcome this modest tribute from an old and grateful friend with a benevolent smile.

The question of the relationship between the “pagan” and “Christian” phases of Aksumite history is commonly resolved in the practical and concrete terms of the “conversion of the ruler”, who governed the city and its territory in the first half of the fourth century. Indeed, the reconstruction of the political-religious activities of 'Ezana (*r. ca.* 330–65/70) is based on an impressive quantity and variety of documentation. Literary, epigraphic and numismatic sources all agree in defining an apparently simple and clear picture, one in which the missionary activity of Frumentius is indispensable: first as 'Ezana's instructor during his childhood; then as the first architect of the newly formed Christian community of Ethiopia; and finally as the first bishop of Aksum (Dombrowski, 1984; Lusini, 2019: 274–6). His role as an unwitting instrument of a “divine” plan clearly emerges from the concurrent epigraphic and numismatic documentation, in which a “before” and “after” 'Ezana's “conversion” is discernible; this leads us to the rational obligation to distinguish at least two periods in the religious life of the ruler and the history of his reign (Robin, 2017: XXVIII–XXXVIII; Rodinson, 2001). The rereading of the epigraphic document *RIÉ* 186 = *DAE* 8 offers us the opportunity to propose a more refined view of the epochal events that influenced the court of Aksum in the first quarter of the fourth century; events which tied together the lives of three characters: Ousanas; 'Ezana, younger brother and successor; and ʾĪl(l)e 'Amida,² father of both.

RIÉ 186 = *DAE* 8 (Drewes, 2019: 207–15, 494–9; Marrassini, 2014: 204–11) is an inscription in Gə'əz written in South Arabian script containing the account of the *res gestae* of an unknown but identifiable ruler: Ousanas I *bā'ase gāśān (cf. Greek *bisi gisene*), son and successor of ʾĪl(l)e 'Amida, and brother of the more famous 'Ezana bā'ase ḥalen. The first line of the epigraph is illegible; as a result, the name of the Aksumite king who dictated it has been lost. Littmann (1913: 21), albeit with some uncertainty (“es bleibt daher eine gewisse Unsicherheit bestehen”), ruled out certain possibilities (“eine Möglichkeit anders zu lesen scheint mir ausgeschlossen”), and included this inscription as part of the sizable collection of epigraphs dictated by 'Ezana. Schneider's (1987: 615) rereading (now confirmed by Drewes, 2019:

² ʾĪl 'Amida according to the transcription adopted systematically by Drewes, adhering to the spelling of the inscriptions, as in Lusini (2004: 70–2); *pace* Bausi (2005).

209, 493, 496) has led to the conclusion that the patronymic is, indeed, the same as 'Ezana's, namely $\Xi\lambda\iota\epsilon$ 'Amida; however, the letters which follow— $B'S[YM/.]\check{S}NM$ (with mimation)—contain the well-known royal epithet in its Greek form: *bisi gisene*. This is interpreted as **bə'ase gəšān*, which is attested by numismatic documentation as referring to Ousanas (Fiaccadori, 2004: 109–10, 2010).

Accordingly, *RIÉ* 186 = *DAE* 8 also represents the earliest known example of “pseudo-Sabaeen”, which consists of using South Arabian characters to produce texts in Gə'əz, or more accurately, a variant of Ge'ez that is intentionally characterized by Sabaeen phonetic and morphological traits. In particular, one observes the persistent and unconventional use of mimation (that is, utilizing a <m> suffix), which in South Arabian has the morphological value of indicating the indefinite noun state (Müller, 2007: 157a–b; Sima, 2003/4; Voigt, 2017: 202–4). Specifying the author and chronology of the epigraph would therefore also help us to reconstruct the creation and development of this particular writing practice, which seems to have played a specific function in the vindication of the Aksumite rulers' identity over the course of approximately two centuries.

“Ousanas”, the name which is conventionally used to indicate the ruler and which is also adopted here, is taken from the Greek inscription of his name as it appears on his coins: $OY\SANA\S$ ($BISI\ \Gamma I\SENE$). As seen in other cases, morphological adaptation has prescribed the addition of the final sigma (e.g., $A\Phi I\Lambda\S$ for Ḥafilā; Bausi, 2018). Also, considering how the initial diphthong is used as a graphic device, to which the vowel /u-/ is certainly subject, we may conclude that the original form for Ousanas must have been “Usana”. Accordingly, we are indeed considering a typical Aksumite royal name, such as 'Ezana, Sazana, Ebana, Nezana, Tazena and Wazena, characterized by the suffixes *-ana* or *-āna*, and whose derivational function may be understood by looking at Agaw languages (Conti, 1912: 105). As for the monosyllabic stems *Us-*, *'Ez-*, *Saz-*, *Eb-*, *Nez-*, *Taz-*, and *Waz-*, they too are frequent in languages such as Bilin, Ḥamtanga, and Kəmantnäy. For “Usana”, we can refer to the development of the base **us-*, which has the well-attested meaning of “man” or “male” (Appleyard, 2006: 65). With the addition of the nominal suffix *-ana*, the etymological meaning can thereby be reconstructed as “virility” (Lusini, 2018: 267–8).

It is evident that the portion of *RIÉ* 186 = *DAE* 8 that can still be read today begins with the four characters $WLDM$ (“son of”, with mimation). These characters are arranged conjointly with the rest of the epigraph, i.e., aligned to the right, according to the graphic conventions of South Arabian. Consequently, either the first line of the text consisted only of the ruler's name³ or it must have originally contained some additional text. Of all the other royal inscriptions known to us, none opens with a line devoted exclusively to the ruler's name, isolated and therefore accentuated with respect to the rest of his title. It would be, in fact, a difficult choice to understand since in the Aksumite context, the ruler's name, patronymic, royal epithet, and list of titles constitute a unitary incipit, that is, not hierarchical and not emphasized by

³ Littmann (1913: 19), who, in the translation, opted for the graphic solution [*'Ēzānā*], centred and extraneous to the numbering of the inscribed lines.

any indentation. If, on the other hand, one admits the presence of other words that preceded the nexus constituted by the ruler's name along with the noun *WLDM*—for example, a celestial invocation—we would have a form comparable to other documented works.

Indeed, we know of more than one Aksumite royal inscription that opens with a request for divine assistance, albeit that these are Christian texts and that surviving examples contain relatively long epicleses, as in *RIÉ* 271 ('Ezana) and *RIÉ* 191 (Kaleb). Only in the case of the well-known *RIÉ* 189 = *DAE* 11, a monotheistic inscription of 'Ezana, is the text of the incipit distributed over the first two lines, lending itself to a comparison with the epigraph of Ousanas.

1. By the power of the Lord of heaven, who is in heaven and on earth, victorious for me. Me 'E-
2. [za]na, son of ʾĒl(l)e 'Amida, man of Ḥalən, king of Aksum [...].

In this inscription, the “signature” of the ruler, the patronymic and the rest of the title have been relegated to the margin of the first line and the beginning of the second by the existence of an invocation to the “Lord of heaven”, who is also mentioned subsequently to the titling, starting from the fifth line. Therefore, the theoretical possibility arises that *RIÉ* 186 = *DAE* 8 also presented an analogous situation, namely:

1. [first line of lost text, with the invocation and name of the ruler]
2. son of ʾĒl(l)e 'Amida, man of [-]ŠNM, king of Aksum ...

Considering the fact that the author claims descent from the god Maḥrəm (the Greek Ares)—whose presence in Aksumite inscriptions is usually associated with 'Astār and Mədr or Bəḥer, forming an astral “triad”—it seems certain that *RIÉ* 186 = *DAE* 8 predates *RIÉ* 189 and therefore the adoption of monotheistic language within the Aksumite court. In fact, the Ousanas inscription does not mention any other figures of the Aksumite pantheon other than Maḥrəm. Accordingly, it may be postulated that the lost incipit of the epigraph contained a brief invocation to a god and that the ruler violated the practice requiring precedence to be given to one's own name, thus adopting a protocol that would only later become mandatory. In light of these assertions, the possibility cannot be excluded that the ruler recognized Maḥrəm not only as a dynastic deity, “[s]tammesgott des Herrschers und Erzeuger des Königs von Aksum” (Brakmann, 1994: 37), but also as the only one worthy of mention in the first line of his own text.

These considerations also provide an opportunity for further reflection on the course taken by the Aksumite court in its eventual placement of faith in the Gospel. Assuming that the custom of opening royal inscriptions with an invocation was occasionally practiced even before the court's “conversion” to monotheism, this practice could be well understood as the intentional expression of a henotheistic faith. It would suggest the need to abandon the paradigm of the “turning point”, linked to the “conversion of the ruler”, and replace it with a model of the gradual establishment of an “innovative” awareness, which coincided with the development and consolidation of the axis between Aksum and Rome, and perhaps also with the

emergence of personalities at the court who were capable of generating and nurturing a religious debate (Piovanelli, 2014: 350–1).

The coins of Ousanas unmistakably show his adherence to the symbology of the traditional astral religion. Therefore, the religious ideas that perhaps underlie *RIÉ* 186 = *DAE* 8 were not necessarily the culmination of a linear process but rather an episode in a path composed of successive adjustments, along which several characters are found, namely ʿĪl(l)e 'Amida and his two sons and heirs to the throne. The rereading of the epigraphs of Ousanas's brother and successor confirms this impression. The polytheistic inscriptions of 'Ezana are recognizable by the fact that they mention the "astral" triad composed by, in addition to Maḥrēm, Astär, and Mədr or Bəher. This is especially evident in the inscription *RIÉ* 188 = *DAE* 10 (campaign against the Särane people), which also mentions Maḥrēm in the opening, to which it adds an offering of thanks to the triad, 'Astär, Bəher, and Mədər (the latter two being treated as separate deities).

Similarly, there is another inscription which belongs to the same religious moment, of which at least two copies remain, commemorating a campaign against the Bəga: *RIÉ* 185 I–II, with the Greek version *RIÉ* 270, which, however, only mentions Ares; and *RIÉ* 185bis I–II, with the Greek version *RIÉ* 270bis, which mentions Ares together with Heaven ('Astär) and Earth (Mədər or Bəher).

Only one "trinitarian" Christian inscription can be attributed to 'Ezana, namely the well-known *RIÉ* 271 (campaign against the Noba people). Its association with two other texts with similar content is rather problematic. In fact, *RIÉ* 189 = *DAE* 11 (whose incipit we hypothetically compared with that of Ousanas's epigraph) and *RIÉ* 190 undoubtedly express a monotheistic religious sensitivity, but not an explicitly "trinitarian" one. They do, albeit with some uncertainty, give thanks to both the "Lord of the Earth" and the "Lord of Heaven", following a gradual process of adaptation to the new Christian religious terminology also found in other cultures of late antiquity (Littmann, 1950: 125–6).

RIÉ 187 = *DAE* 9 presents, more than any other work, a context comparable to that of the Ousanas inscription. In both, the rulers proclaim their descent from Maḥrēm, but are silent on any other deity of the Aksumite pantheon. An even more articulated situation can be found in *RIÉ* 270bis, particularly in its *explicit* that is significantly longer than its twin *RIÉ* 270, in which we find the text, "and if therefore anyone wishes to offend him (i.e., Ares), let the god of heaven and of the earth destroy him" (Bernard, 2000: 12–15; Marrassini, 2014: 50, 214; Uhlig, 2001: 21, 29–31).

Therefore, the need arises to place these documents along a path of historical-religious development which is not finalistic, that is, a path in which Christianity is the necessary endpoint, and whereby what is not yet Christian is considered "als vollziehend und nicht als vollzogen" (Uhlig, 2001: 29). The terminology employed by the two rulers allows us to reconstruct their personal and at times contradictory approach to a henotheistic religious sensibility. The alternation between different ways of expressing their religious views within their discourses reflects ongoing contemplation and perhaps debate within the court itself. This stage must have lasted, with alternating outcomes, throughout the first half of the fourth century and involved the entire dynastic generation of ʿĪl(l)e 'Amida's children.

Ousanas and ‘Ezana ruled in succession, but both must have known Frumentius, who came to court during the reign of ʾĪl(l)e ‘Amida. The traditional account of Ousanas’s reign contains no mention of him, while his father is undoubtedly referenced under the altered name of ʾĪllä Alada (in which the first element was reinterpreted as a pronoun). It is evidently one of the “selective” procedures so dear to hagiographers, in which historical elements are trimmed and repurposed in light of the religious discourse. In particular, the construction of the myth of the “conversion of the ruler” must have entailed a reduction of the actors and the functional roles within the *mise en scène*. Even ‘Ezana himself did not come out unscathed from the comparison with Frumentius, *abba Sälama*, or *Käsate bərhan*, considering that his name was obscured and supplanted by the unrecognizable onomastic neoformation ʾĪllä Azg^wag^wa, which in all likelihood originates from a toponym, unrelated to the name of the king (Marrassini, 2014: 67–8).

It is more than probable that the emergence of a receptivity toward the henotheistic message was related to the events of the religious history which characterizes many Mediterranean civilizations of the fourth century, particularly South Arabia. In fact, as early as the third century, “la religion Sabéenne tendait peut-être vers l’hénothéisme avec Almaqah apparaissant comme le dieu suprême” (Gajda, 2009: 223). The Sabaeen inscriptions from the Awwām temple in Mārib attest to this trend; the role of Almaqah as the only deity worthy of invocation in the Sabaeen inscriptions is comparable to that of Maḥrēm in Aksumite inscriptions such as *RIÉ* 187 = *DAE* 9 (‘Ezana), and probably *RIÉ* 186 = *DAE* 8 (Ousanas). In both contexts, one god prevails over the others for different reasons, from the prestige of one of its cultural centers (Almaqah in Mārib) to the existing link between the deity and the ruling dynasty (Maḥrēm in Aksum).

Around 340, ‘Ezana imposed Christianity as the official religion of the Aksumite court; by *ca.* 380, even the rulers of the kingdom of Ḥimyar had solidified their own choice in favor of Judaizing monotheism (Gajda, 2010: 117, 2009: 223–4, 239–45) or Judeo-monotheism (Robin, 2015: 173–4). However, this “new” wind must have begun to blow some time earlier on both coasts of the Red Sea, originally in a henotheistic form. From this point of view, Aksum and Ḥimyar, the two regional powers in open rivalry for control of trade in the southern Red Sea, each demonstrate independent development toward a common direction, an indication of a continuous (and not just conflictual) relationship between the ruling groups of the two kingdoms. Even the writing practice of “pseudo-Sabaeen” (used in the fourth century by Ousanas and ‘Ezana, and then two hundred years later by Kaleb and his son W’ZB) was not only an expression of the Aksumite ruler’s willingness to appropriate South Arabian tradition and to represent, through allography, his aspirations of a *translation imperii* between Ẓafār and Aksum (Lusini, 2022: 365–7). It was also a manifestation of reciprocal influence between the two cultures, as evidenced by the fact that when the same inscription exists in two different Gə’əz versions, the text in South Arabian script has a more “official” character than the one using Ethiopian characters (Marrassini, 2014: 37, 76). The effect of this “convergence” is noticeable, especially in the religious context. In the two hundred years that separated Kaleb from ‘Ezana, the ancient pluralism of distant near-eastern ancestry ended up definitively giving

way in both kingdoms to the advance of monistic thought. In this process, it cannot be ruled out that contacts with the Persian world also exerted a certain influence; that the tenets of Mazdean henotheism, the state religion of the Sasanian Empire, were echoed in Zafār and Aksum as an effect of the trade relations which undoubtedly took place (Cerulli, 1971: 457–9; Monneret de Villard, 1938: 327–8).

RIÉ 186 = *DAE* 8 describes the itinerary of a campaign undertaken by Ousanas to re-establish his sovereignty over certain regions. Determining the borders of the Ag^wezat would benefit from recognizing that SWSWT (the name of the ruler who accepts the authority of Ousanas and pays him the tribute) is a dialectal variant of the Gə'əz *sisit* ("nourishment, food"). This is the convincing proposal of Drewes (2019: 211), who also appropriately establishes a parallel with the personal name Sisay, still widely used throughout Ethiopia. Therefore, SWSWT being a Semitic name, the Ag^wezat would have been a community settled in an area not too far from the provinces under the direct control of Aksum, in which Gə'əz was the language of the ruling class. A location east of the capital seems very plausible since, in the same inscription, Ousanas meets another authority, "the king of GBZ, SBL, with his troops", who offers him his submission. GBZ is certainly Gābāza, namely the port of Adulis (Drewes, 2019: 497–8); in all likelihood, the name SBL contains a reference to the well-known Gə'əz terms *səbul* ("covered with ears"), and *säbl* ("ear of corn") (as in proper names such as Säblä Wängel); the mention of Gābāza proves that Ousanas "était en route en direction de la côte" (Drewes, 2019: 500).

Moreover, it is no coincidence that even today Ag^wäza or Agoza denotes a locality and district (*qušät*) of Tigray "located in the mountains facing the northern cliffs of the Gär'alta massif, on the east side of the Hawzen-Tämben road" (Balicka-Witakowska, 2014: 224a), where there are two distinct rock churches, one of which dates back to at least the fifteenth century. The addition of a plural suffix *-at* to the toponym Ag^weza, a variant of Ag^wäza for an exchange between the first and fifth orders, determines without difficulty the ethnonym Ag^wezat to refer to the ancient political-social group established east of the Kingdom of Aksum, and which claimed a certain degree of political autonomy from it. Moreover, the inscription of Ousanas does not contain an actual account of military actions; instead, its prevailing intention is to commemorate the king's ability to "reintegrate and reorder the country",⁴ alternating between punitive acts and confirmation of alliances sanctioned by the payment of tribute.

From his brother and predecessor, 'Ezana inherited the need to keep the Ag^wezat territory under control. Indeed, inscription *RIÉ* 187 = *DAE* 9 (Drewes, 2019: 215–28, 500–4; Marrassini, 2014: 224–8) recounts how 'Ezana celebrated victory over the same people, whose ruler is named Abä'alkə'o, probably to be interpreted as a compound of two terms. If *abä* is nothing more than the declined form (genitive) of *ab*, in the sense of "master, a person in charge", *alkə'o* would be the nominalized infinitive of the causative form of the verb *läk'al-'a* (Leslau, 1991: 313a), with the

⁴ "[P]er reintegrare e riordinare il paese" (Marrassini 2014: 207); "um sein Reich wiederherzustellen und zu ordnen" (Littmann 1913: 19); "pour remettre en état le pays et lui imposer sa loi" (Drewes 2019: 208).

meaning of *signandum*, *consignandum curare*, that is “to seal, authenticate” (Dillmann, 1865: 50b). Therefore, being more than a proper name, it seems to be a title originally reserved for the head of a province or a local magistrate with political prerogatives,⁵ subsequently crystallized in an onomastic form, like for instance *səyyum* or *māk^w annən*. The Ag^wezat presence in Eastern Tigray, where their traces are found in the toponym Ag^weza, is confirmed in the inscription of Ḥngabo, where it is mentioned as the location of the first meeting between ‘Ezana and Abä’alkə’o, which must have then been followed by the breakdown in relations which is depicted in the rest of the inscription. Of the various proposals put forward, the most convincing is that of Drewes, who identifies Ḥngabo with ‘GB of RIE 218 (Drewes, 2019: 312–15, 500), that is with Maryam ‘Anza, for which “le royaume des ‘Ag^wezāt a dû se trouver à l’est d’Axoum, pas loin de Hawzen”, which means in the vicinity of the current *qušāt di Ag^wäza*.

The itinerary of Ousanas’s campaign described in RIE 186 = DAE 8 touches on several localities that cannot be precisely placed on the map at the moment: ‘LB, where the meeting with SWSWT, king of the ‘Ag^wezat, takes place; FNŞĤT, where the meeting with SBL, king of Gäbäza, takes place; and HMŠ, which may be a broader reference that includes the Eritrean region of Ḥamasen (Huntingford, 1989: 53; Littmann, 1913: 22) since it is here that the meeting with “all the tribes of MṬN” takes place. Here, MṬN may refer to Metine, found in the inscription on Adulis’ throne, reported by Cosma Indicopleuste (Huntingford, 1989: 53; Littmann 1913: 22); it may also refer to Mātīn, which Ibn Ḥawqal places in the region of Bāḏi’, i.e., Massawa (Drewes, 2019: 498–9; Lusini, 2003). These references allow us to reconstruct some of the stages of Ousanas’s “journey”, which had as its primary objective the affirmation of his control over the territories east and northeast of Aksum, from Eastern Tigray to the Eritrean coast. In fact, the vital land communication route with the port of Adulis, a genuine and irreplaceable source of Aksum’s financial wealth, passed through here.

Notably, these meetings seem to have occurred in the safe areas of the highlands. These were places under the direct control of the sovereign, who merely collected the tribute and granted the “peripheral” authorities the same title of “king”, which he had reserved for himself. Praxes such as this, in which other kings, to avoid military retaliation, paid a tribute tax in the form of a gift,⁶ undoubtedly reinforced the most famous self-designation of the Aksumite ruler, namely *nəgušä nəgäšt*, “king who exercises primacy over other kings”, helping to redefine a title whose model dates back at least to Ptolemaic times (Fiaccadori, 2007). Furthermore, if the name of Usana/Ousanas, king of Aksum, has an Agaw etymology, while his counterparts bore Semitic epithets (from SBL king of Gäbäza to SWSWT king of the ‘Ag^wezat, and also his successor Abä’alkə’o), we may conclude that perhaps the history of Aksum is indeed far more complex than the simplifications of historiographical models have so far led us irresistibly to believe. Rereading the actual inscriptions

⁵ Analogous to, for example, *abäga’əz* or *abägaz* (Chernetsov 2003; Kane 1990: 1205a).

⁶ As the “technical” expression *bo’a* or *gab’a gada* suggests, see Drewes (2019: 210–11).

with an eye less oriented toward tradition may yet provide us with new elements of greater understanding.

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The First Muslims in Africa? Sources and Methods Regarding the Hijra to Abyssinia



Torsten Hylén

Abstract According to Muslim tradition, the Prophet Muḥammad sent some of his followers to Abyssinia to escape from the persecution that he and his community experienced in Mecca. This first *hijra* (Arabic for “emigration”) is the first recorded instance of Muslims in Africa, and has become a story of great importance for many African Muslims, even today. The tradition relates how the Negus of Abyssinia received the Muslim emigrants well. He did not hand them over to the Meccan delegation that opponents to the Prophet had sent to bring them back. According to one tradition, the Negus even converted to Islam. The story is related, or alluded to, in two categories of sources that claim to describe the life of Muḥammad: the biographies of his life, and some of the *ḥadīths*, i.e. legal traditions said to record his sayings and doings. Modern scholars have debated to what extent these sources can be used in the study of the history of the Prophet; their positions range from total scepticism to more or less uncritical acceptance of the sources. In this study, two sources regarding the migration to Abyssinia are investigated, one from each of the above-mentioned categories: a letter describing the early work of the Prophet, purportedly written by the traditionist ‘Urwa b. al-Zubayr (d. 713), and a *ḥadīth* about tensions between the migrants to Abyssinia and those who remained in Mecca. The conclusion is that there is reason to believe that the Abyssinian migration actually took place, although details, such as the dealings between the migrants and the Negus, are probably later additions to the story.

Keywords Muhammad · Abyssinia · Hijra · Early Islam · Hadith

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T. Hylén (✉)
Dalarna University, Falun, Sweden
e-mail: thy@du.se

Fig. 1 The red sea region around 600 CE. Map: Astrid Hylén



Introduction

Modern introductions to Islam in Africa often state that the first Muslims in Africa were a small group of the adherents of the Prophet Muḥammad, whom he sent to Abyssinia¹ so they might escape the persecutions by pagan Meccans of the tribe of Quraysh. This assertion is based on a tradition which is related in several sources about the activities of the Prophet. The most famous version is related by Ibn Hishām (1858, 9; Eng. Transl. Ibn Ishāq 1955) in his biography of the Prophet, *Sīrat rasūl Allāh*, and goes as follows:

When the apostle saw the affliction of his companions and that though he escaped it because of his standing with Allāh and his uncle Abū Ṭālib, he could not protect them, he said to them: “If you were to go to Abyssinia (it would be better for you), for the king will not tolerate injustice and it is a friendly country, until such time as Allah shall relieve you from your distress.” Thereupon his companions went to Abyssinia, being afraid of apostasy and fleeing to God with their religion. This was the first *hijra* in Islam.²

¹ A note on terminology: the toponym Abyssinia is a Europeanised form of the Semitic *Ḥabashat*. In the Arabic sources consulted here, it is named *arḍ al-Ḥabasha*, “the land of Abyssinia”. This probably refers to the eastern part of the kingdom of Aksum, the coast of the Red Sea (Robin 2012: 255). See Fig. 1.

² Ibn Ishāq (1955: 146), parenthesis in original. The Arabic word *hijra* can be translated “migration” in general. It is used in particular for the move of the Prophet and his companions from Mecca to Medina in 622 CE, but also for the migration to Abyssinia. Dates are given in the Gregorian calendar, only.

Then follows a long list enumerating the 83 men who travelled to Abyssinia; some women and children are also mentioned in the list (Ibn Ishāq 1955: 147–48). The story continues by relating how the Negus, the king of Abyssinia, was kind to the Muslims, and they lived happily in his country.³ When Muḥammad's opponents in Mecca heard about this, they sent two envoys with gifts to the Negus in Abyssinia in an attempt to persuade him to send the Muslims back to Arabia. The Negus, however, asked the Muslims about their faith, and their leader, Ja'far ibn Abī Ṭālib, recited Sura 19 from the Qur'ān to him. This Sura has a lot to say about Jesus, and when the Negus heard it, he “wept until his beard was wet and the bishops wept until their scrolls were wet [...]. Then, the Negus said, ‘Of a truth, this and what Jesus brought have come from the same niche. You two [who were sent to get the Muslims back] may go, for by God, I will never give them up and they shall not be betrayed’” (Ibn Ishāq 1955: 152).

The Negus thus accepted the Qur'ānic view about Jesus and made this his own belief (Ibn Ishāq 1955: 152, 154–5). Ibn Hishām and other historians and traditionists also relate several other reports about the dealings between the Negus and the Muslims—both the exiles in Abyssinia and those in Arabia, including the Prophet Muḥammad himself (Raven, 1988). Some traditions even relate that the Negus converted to Islam, and numerous reports describe the Prophet and his companions praying for him when hearing about his death (see e.g. Ibn Ishāq 1955: 154–5).

Western scholars have long been divided on the matter of the reliability of the sources to the life of Muḥammad and early Islam, in particular for events occurring before the emigration of the Prophet and his companions to Medina in 622 CE. On the other hand, there is no doubt that there were many political, military, commercial and religious contacts between the Arabian Peninsula and Abyssinia (Kropp, 2008; Power, 2012; Robin, 2012). Thus, it is not difficult to imagine that such a migration could have taken place. The question, then, is whether the migration of Muḥammad's companions to Abyssinia actually did occur; or, at least, whether it is possible to know if it took place or not. Are the sources reliable on this matter, and if so, to what extent? Although I have not encountered any scholar who has challenged the historicity of this particular event, the general distrust of the veracity of the sources demands that each episode related in the sources about the life of the Prophet be analysed. For African Muslims, who are frequently described as living in the “Islamic periphery”, the story about the migration to Abyssinia is of essential importance, as it gives them a place in the earliest history of Islam and thus locates them in the very centre of the history of Islam. Alessandro Gori (2020: 146) writes that the story

functions nowadays as a kind of foundation myth for all Muslims in the Horn of Africa...
The possibility of tracing the arrival of Islam in Ethiopia back to the very beginning of the

³ Donner (2003, 2010) argues that the terms “Islam” as a designation for a religion, and “Muslims” for its adherents, were not used until the beginning of the eighth century CE. Before that, the followers of Muhammad and his teachings were called “Believers”. I will follow Donner and employ “Islam” and “Muslim(s)” only when I quote or summarise the sources, which of course normally back-project this usage. Otherwise, I will use “Believers” to denote adherents of the new movement in the seventh century.

new religion gives Muslims of the country a strong sense of pride towards their Christian fellow countrymen and toward their non-Ethiopian fellow Muslims.

Gori's statement can be applied to Muslims not only on the Horn of Africa, but all over the African continent. In the following, I will combine two categories of sources from the first centuries of Islam, the historical–biographical narratives about the Prophet and the legal traditions, the *ḥadīth*. Taken together, they will allow me to argue that the migration likely did take place, even though the dealings with the Negus himself cannot be verified. Though sources in Arabic which have their origin outside of Africa, they can, thus, shed light on an issue that are of utmost importance to many African Muslims.

The Sources

In this section, I will discuss two kinds of sources to the life of the Prophet Muḥammad, and in particular, the Abyssinian migration: the historical–biographical material and the legal traditions, the *ḥadīths*.⁴ Both these categories have the same basic structure, in that they consist of shorter units made up of two components: a self-contained narrative part which relates an event or sequence of events (Ar. *matn*), and a chain of authorities that have transmitted this narrative from generation to generation (Ar. *isnād*). The historical–biographical units are usually called *khābars* in Arabic, and the juridical traditions *ḥadīths*. Both words convey the meaning of “information” or “announcement”; the difference between them is mainly that of content and purpose.⁵

Historical–Biographical Sources

As mentioned, the summary of the story of the Muslim migration to Abyssinia given above comes from the Muslim scholar ‘Abd al-Malik ibn Hishām’s biography of Muḥammad, *Sīrat rasūl Allāh* (*The Life of our Lord Muḥammad, the Messenger of God*).⁶ Ibn Hishām died c. 833 CE, that is, about two hundred years after the death of

⁴ For the sake of convenience and readability, I use the English plurals. Here, then, I write *ḥadīths* rather than the Arabic *aḥādīth*. The same principle is applied for other Arabic plurals. For the relationship between the biographies and the *ḥadīths*, see Görke (2011).

⁵ In this paper, I have only used sources necessary for my argument. For a more complete list of sources to the Abyssinian *hijra*, see Gori (2007).

⁶ The work is given different titles in different contexts. The title used in Wüstenfeld’s edition, which I have consulted, is *Sīrat sayyidunā Muḥammad rasūl Allāh*. For other variants, see Anthony (2020: 162n165). The translation of the word *sīra* as “life” can also be discussed (Anthony 2020: 147n190).

the Prophet.⁷ His work, however, is a heavily edited summary of an earlier work by the famous biographer of the Prophet, Muḥammad Ibn Ishāq (d. ca. 768).⁸ Traditions about the Prophet before the mid-eighth century were not transmitted as “published” books. They were normally handed on orally from teacher to student, and the way of transmission was recorded in the *isnāds*, the chains of transmission. Sometimes they were written down as lecture notes and kept by teachers and students. Such compendia of notes were at times handed on, not as “official” texts from a given author, but as less formal notebooks. This means that the texts were not fixed, but kept changing as the “author” (i.e. the teacher) worked on them.⁹ Apparently, Ibn Ishāq’s original work was huge, and included several parts: a history of the world from the creation to the time of Muḥammad, the biography of the Prophet, and the decades after his death. Sean Anthony (2020: 157) has described it as “a truly massive undertaking—thitherto unprecedented in the history of Arabic literature—and the programmatic efforts to record and disseminate it were exceeded only by the efforts dedicated to record the Qur’ān”. We know that Ibn Ishāq changed and re-worked the text several times, and that his students must have transmitted different versions of his text (*ibidem*: 160). Unfortunately, Ibn Ishāq’s enormous work is not extant, and we have to rely on the various abbreviated versions of some of his students. These are mostly preserved only as fragments within other texts. Ibn Hishām’s version that I have mentioned, is the only one that is preserved as a stand-alone book.¹⁰

Besides Ibn Hishām’s edition, another important source for Ibn Ishāq’s biography is the universal history of al-Ṭabarī (d. 923), entitled *Tārīkh al-rusul wa-l-mulūk* (1879–1901). Al-Ṭabarī’s version is important in that it does not draw on Ibn Hishām’s rendering of Ibn Ishāq, but that of other transmitters, so it can be used for comparison with Ibn Hishām. Furthermore, it includes portions of Ibn Ishāq’s version that Ibn Hishām has omitted.¹¹

In his long section on the life and work of the Prophet Muḥammad, al-Ṭabarī also utilises other sources than Ibn Ishāq. Particularly interesting is a series of texts, purportedly letters written by ‘Urwa ibn al-Zubayr (d. ca. 713), who was a nephew of Muḥammad’s wife ‘Ā’isha (d. ca. 678). ‘Urwa is supposed to have written these letters to the caliphs ‘Abd al-Malik (r. 685–705) and his son al-Walīd (r. 705–15) on their behest, in order to inform them about the life of the Prophet. Nine letters

⁷ All the death dates of early Muslims mentioned in this paper are approximate due to the unreliable state of the sources, and to the mismatch between the Muslim (*Hijrī*) and the Gregorian calendars.

⁸ On him and his colleagues, see Schoeler (2011: 26–33); Anthony (2020: 150–8).

⁹ In particular, Schoeler (2006, 2009) has written about the relationship between oral and written tradition in early Islam. In fact, there was a strong aversion against writing down traditions about the Prophet, as many thought it might diminish the significance of the Qur’ān.

¹⁰ Not only Ibn Ishāq, but also other contemporaneous scholars created biographies of the Prophet, although none as comprehensive. Below I will discuss one of these, written by Ma’mar Ibn Rāshid al-Azdī (2015).

¹¹ For the versions of Ibn Ishāq’s biography mentioned above and various other recensions of the text, see Anthony (2020: 158–71) and Schoeler (2011: 31–4).

of ‘Urwa are preserved by al-Ṭabarī.¹² If ‘Urwa is the author of these texts, they are indeed the earliest extant narratives relating to the life and work of Muḥammad. While their authenticity has been contested by some modern scholars (de Prémare, 2002: 14–6; Robinson, 2003: 23–4; Shoemaker, 2011), others accept it (Anthony, 2020: 103–5; Görke & Schoeler, 2008). I will come back to this question below. In contrast to Ibn Ishāq’s chronologically arranged work, ‘Urwa’s letters are organised thematically. Thus, one of his letters deals with the two migrations of the Prophet and his companions, the one to Abyssinia which probably occurred in 615 and the one to Medina in 622. The rendering of the migration to Abyssinia is thus placed immediately before the long section about the *hijra* to Medina. The passage about Abyssinia is much briefer than that in Ibn Ishāq which I summarised at the beginning of this article. In the following quotation, I have given the chain of authorities. Then follows a description of the Meccan persecution of Muḥammad’s followers (omitted in the quote), after which the migration is described:

‘Alī ibn Naṣr and ‘Abd al-Wārith ibn ‘Abd al-Ṣamad—‘Abd al-Ṣamad—Abān al-‘Aṭṭār—Hishām ibn ‘Urwa—‘Urwa: ... When that befell the Muslims, the Messenger of God commanded them to depart for the land of Abyssinia. In Abyssinia there was a righteous king called the Negus. None were oppressed in his land, and because of that, word of his righteousness spread. The land of Abyssinia was a destination for trade where the Quraysh would conduct business and where they had found a lucrative livelihood, safety, and a fair market, so the Messenger of God commanded them to go there. Most of them went there when they found themselves beleaguered in Mecca. He feared what the trials of persecution [*al-ḥitan*] would do to them, but he himself remained and did not leave. That remained the case for several years as the Quraysh continued to deal harshly with those who became Muslim.¹³

Although the Negus is mentioned as the righteous king of the country, in contrast to Ibn Ishāq’s version, nothing is said about any direct dealings between him and the Believers, or about his acceptance of the message of the Qur’ān. Nor are there any lists of migrants. After this brief account of the Abyssinian migration follows the much longer passage relating events leading up to Muḥammad’s *hijra* to Medina, as well as the *hijra* itself.

We must remember that the *hijra* to Medina in 622 was much more important to the history of Islam than the Abyssinian migration. Hence, while the Medinan migration is transmitted in many versions, traditions about the exile to Abyssinia are not so frequent. This is true also of traditions from ‘Urwa. In addition to the letter, various traditions from him on the Prophet’s *hijra* to Medina that were probably transmitted orally are preserved in other sources. At times they include the preceding *hijra* to Abyssinia, but very often they omit this relatively minor event. Many of the oral traditions from ‘Urwa are transmitted by his famous pupil Ibn Shihāb al-Zuhrī (d.

¹² Some of these al-Ṭabarī has preserved only in his seminal commentary to the Qur’ān. Other early Muslim scholars also have transmitted some of the letters or parts of them. For a collection of all the letters from various sources, an English translation of them, and a discussion of them with a tentative conclusion in favour of their authenticity, see Anthony (2020: 102–28).

¹³ Ṭabarī 1879–1901: ser. I, 1181; translated by Anthony (2020: 110–11), (bracket in original). I have omitted some of the surnames of the traditionists in the *isnād* to save space. See also Fig. 2.

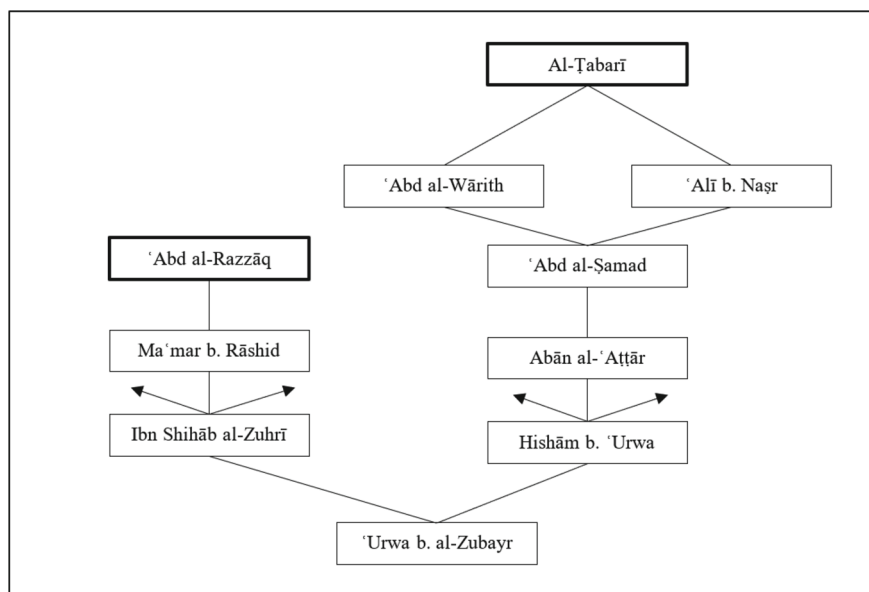


Fig. 2 Complete lines of transmission of the *hijra* tradition from 'Urwa to Ṭabarī and 'Abd al-Razzāq. Arrows signify *isnāds* continuing to other extant works. Bold frames signify works extant today

742). Al-Zuhrī's student Ma'mar Ibn Rāshid (d. 770) in his turn put these into writing in a biography of the Prophet, entitled *Al-Maghāzī* ("The Expeditions"), which is preserved to us in an edition by Ma'mar's student 'Abd al-Razzāq (d. 827) (Ma'mar Ibn Rāshid al-Azdī 2015). Ma'mar is one of the historians that has included the Abyssinian *hijra* in his rendering of the migrations. Like Ibn Ishāq and 'Urwa, he begins by relating the persecutions against the believers. Then he goes on:

'Abd al-Razzāq—Ma'mar—al-Zuhrī—'Urwa: [...] We were told that the Messenger of God said to those who had faith in him, "Seek out another land," but they asked, "O Messenger of God! Where shall we go?" "There," he said and with his hand pointed toward Abyssinia. It was the land that the Messenger of God preferred above all others for their emigration. People thus emigrated in great numbers, some emigrating with their families and others by themselves, and they eventually arrived in Abyssinia. (Ma'mar Ibn Rāshid al-Azdī 2015: 112–13).

Then follows a list of emigrants, but in contrast to that of Ibn Ishāq, which contained 83 names as we saw above, Ma'mar's has the names of only four men and their wives. After that, he describes the events leading up to the migration to Medina in 622 CE, and the *hijra* itself.¹⁴

¹⁴ Ibn Ishāq also used 'Urwa as one of his sources. I have not included him in this analysis, as his combination of sources make the analysis quite complicated. For a fuller analysis, see Görke and Schoeler (2005, 2008: 60–5).

Legal *Ḥadīth*

The second category of sources for the Abyssinian *hijra* are *ḥadīths* that have been preserved for juridical rather than narrative purposes; in this context, I will discuss one of these which exists in a couple of versions. Let us begin with the short one:

Muḥammad ibn al-‘Alā’—Abū Usāma—Burayd ibn ‘Abdallāh—Abū Burda—Abū Mūsā (may God be pleased with him): We got the news about the Prophet’s (May God preserve him and give him peace) departure [to Medina] when we were in Yemen. So, we went aboard a ship, but our ship threw us at the Negus in Abyssinia. There we met Ja‘far ibn Abī Ṭālib, so we stayed with him until we arrived [in Medina] and met the Prophet (May God preserve him and give him peace) when he had conquered Khaybar. The Prophet (May God preserve him and give him peace) said, “People of the ship, you will have the reward of two *hijras*.”¹⁵

In this tradition, preserved by the famous *ḥadīth* collector al-Bukhārī (d. 870), who compiled one of the six “canonical” collections of *ḥadīths*,¹⁶ the first sentence consists of the *isnād*, the chain of authorities. This goes backwards, so to say, from the most recent transmitter, Muḥammad ibn ‘Alā’ (d. 862), to Abū Mūsā (d. 663), a prominent companion of the Prophet. Then follows the *matn*, the short text that describes the event leading up to the reported declaration by the Prophet: some of Muḥammad’s companions were in Yemen when they heard about his *hijra*, his emigration to Medina in 622 CE; they boarded a ship, presumably to join him, but they ended up in Abyssinia (perhaps because of a storm¹⁷), where they met Ja‘far, the leader of those companions who had migrated there during the persecutions in Mecca. When they finally reached Medina, the Prophet let them know that they would be rewarded for not one *hijra* (from Mecca to Medina), but two (from Mecca to Abyssinia, and from Abyssinia to Medina).

This *ḥadīth* is a short version of a much longer tradition which gives more of a background to the Prophet’s declaration, and which is discussed by Leone Caetani (1905–1926: vol. 1, 262–83) in his study of the Abyssinian *hijra*. Caetani maintains that the migration to Abyssinia was not always regarded in positive terms by those Muslims who had remained in Mecca. Muḥammad’s companions in Mecca, he argues, had to endure persecution and harassment from the non-Muslim Meccans, while the migrants to Abyssinia had in cowardly fashion escaped and had lived in peace across the sea, returning only once Muḥammad and his followers had gained the upper hand in Medina. Those who had stayed behind thus considered themselves

¹⁵ Al-Bukhārī (1862–1908: vol. 3, Book 63, Chap. 37, 5).

¹⁶ Muslims soon became aware that many *ḥadīths* were apocryphal in the sense that they did not originate from Muḥammad. Putting one’s own opinion in the mouth of the Prophet, who was increasingly regarded as the normative example for all Muslims, gave it a legitimacy that was often thought to surpass rational arguments (de Prémare 2002: 20–3). In an attempt to sift false traditions from genuine, massive efforts were made by *ḥadīth* scholars in the ninth and early tenth centuries to study the traditions critically. The result was that six major collections of *ḥadīth* were regarded within the Sunni branch of Islam as “canonical” and as more reliable than many others were. Shiite Muslims have their own collections of *ḥadīth*, which stem not only from the Prophet, but also from the Imams (Kohlberg 1983).

¹⁷ The Arabic text implies that the arrival in Abyssinia was unintentional and unexpected.

better Muslims than those who had gone to Abyssinia. This eventually became a matter not only of prestige, but also of economy. When the empire expanded, the Muslims were classified according to the services they and their ancestors had rendered to Muḥammad and his cause and were given allowances from the imperial treasure in accordance with that (Duri 2011: 161–7). Among the most esteemed were the class of those who had emigrated to Medina together with the Prophet. What, then, of those who had migrated to Abyssinia before the *hijra* to Medina and re-joined Muḥammad only after that? How were they to be classified in the royal *diwān*?

Caetani (1905–1926: vol. 1, 264–65n2) argues that this is the problem behind the statement ascribed to Muḥammad about receiving merit for two *hijras*, and we can see this more clearly in the long version of the *ḥadīth*, which he discusses in a footnote. Like the short version, the long one is found in al-Bukhārī's (1862–1908: vol. 3, Book 64, Chap. 38, 33) collection.¹⁸ The first part of this version relates the story about the group in Yemen and the journey by ship via Abyssinia to Medina, although in slightly more detail than the short version. Then follows a section that is omitted in the short version, which relates how a woman called Asmā' bint Umayy returned from the Abyssinian migration to Medina. She met 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb—one of Muḥammad's closest companions and the second caliph after the Prophet's death—who told Asmā' that the *hijra* of those who had stayed in Mecca and then moved directly to Medina was worth more than that of her and her friends who had gone to Abyssinia, and that those who had remained in Mecca were closer to the Prophet than the Abyssinian migrants. Asmā' was of course very upset and said to 'Umar: "You were with the Apostle of God (May God preserve him and give him peace), who fed the poor among you and advised the ignorant among you, while we were in a place in the most far-off and hated land, Abyssinia; and that for the sake of God and for the Messenger of God [...] We were troubled and afraid" (Al-Bukhārī 1862–1908: vol. 3, 138–139).¹⁹ She told the Prophet what 'Umar had said, and he assured her that 'Umar was no closer to him than they were, and that those who had been to Abyssinia would receive the merit of two *hijras*, whereas those who had remained in Mecca and migrated with him directly to Medina had made only one.

Epistemology

I have already mentioned that the authenticity of the sources is contested. By this, I mean that modern scholars in the Western academic context debate whether the texts give us a picture, however biased, of the events of the seventh century movement of Believers, or whether they are only a literary construction, a "salvation

¹⁸ The long *ḥadīth* is also found in Muslim (2006: Book 44, Chap. 41, No. 2502–2503).

¹⁹ The account of the meeting between Asmā' and 'Umar, without the preceding journey, is also related by Ibn Sa'd (2001: vol. X, 266).

history”²⁰ constructed under the auspices of the Abbasid caliphate in the ninth to eleventh centuries (Donner, 1998: 1–31; Robinson, 2003: 18–38; Schoeler, 2011: 15–18). To simplify matters a bit, scholars who have mainly been concerned with the biographical literature have approached these sources with an attitude either of rather uncritical acceptance (e.g. Watt, 1953, 1956) or of outright rejection (e.g. Wansbrough, 1977, 1978). In fact, not many have taken a position between these two poles, perhaps because so few sources have been available. In 1980, Patricia Crone (1980: 4) wrote, “[...] the *Sīra* of Ibn Ishāq is practically our only source for the life of Muḥammad preserved within the Islamic tradition [...] one can take the picture presented or one can leave it, but one cannot *work* with it”.²¹ Researchers who have studied the biographical material have until recently seldom paid attention to the *isnāds*, which are often incomplete and sketchy and sometimes totally absent in these sources. Thus, most have turned their attention to the narrative material, the *matns*, only.²²

Scholars who have used the *ḥadīth* literature as their main source, on the other hand, have often probed the *isnāds* as well as the *matns*. This does not mean they have uncritically accepted the authenticity of the *ḥadīths*, however. In 1949, Joseph Schacht (1949: 143) published an article in which he maintained that the *ḥadīths* “reflect the opinions held during the first two and a half centuries” of Islam, rather than the words and deeds of the Prophet. He developed this view and his methodology in his epoch-making book *The Origins of Muhammadan Jurisprudence*, published the following year (Schacht, 1950), where he argued that we can identify the true date of a *ḥadīth* by analysing its *isnād*. From his perspective, most *ḥadīths* are unreliable as sources to the events they describe, though they can be used to trace the later legal and doctrinal developments in Islam.

Since the 1990s, some scholars, mainly of German background, have developed Schacht’s *isnād* analysis and have used it in conjunction with textual analyses of the *matns*. Their position is that neither the *ḥadīths* nor the biographical *khābars* are inherently false just because many of them are demonstrably so. Instead, each *ḥadīth* and each *khābar* must be analysed in order to determine to what extent it can be said to reflect a historical reality. This is of course an arduous task, and in many cases, we will not be able to come to any definitive conclusion. Harald Motzki has given the most systematic description of this method, which he calls *isnād-cum-matn* analysis—(Motzki et al., 2010: 146–7). In brief, the scholar following this method tries to correlate the variations of the *matns* with the *isnāds* to see if a specific variant of the *matn* corresponds to a particular transmission history. Motzki himself has mainly used this method on the study of legal *ḥadīths*, but Gregor Schoeler and Andreas Görke (2005, 2008) have applied it to historical works as well, and I will briefly recapitulate their analysis.

Figure 2 is a chart of the chains of transmitters of ‘Urwa’s letter about the *hijra*, which includes the short passage about the Abyssinian migration. I have completed

²⁰ The expression as applied to early Islam is Wansbrough’s (1977).

²¹ Italics in original. See also Schoeler (2011: 3–13).

²² A notable exception is Caetani (1905–1926: vol. 1, 28–58).

only the chains of authorities from ‘Urwa via his son Hishām to al-Ṭabarī, and from ‘Urwa via his student al-Zuhrī to the biography of Ma‘mar, but I have indicated by arrows that the story about the *hijra* to Medina is found in other works as well. As mentioned above, the various versions on the *hijra* theme are “in fact a conglomerate, in which different events are concatenated to a single narrative” (Görke & Schoeler, 2005: 214). The migration to Abyssinia is one of the events which is sometimes, though far from always, included. Görke and Schoeler (2008: 75) have demonstrated that those accounts on the *hijra* theme that are transmitted by ‘Urwa’s pupil Ibn Shihāb al-Zuhrī differ in several details from those transmitted by Hishām b. ‘Urwa. Still, the basic story is the same, no matter who has transmitted it. Had the different versions been very similar, one could have suspected that one of the transmitters had copied his version from another one. In that case we would not have two independent renderings of the same event from ‘Urwa, but only one which had been copied and modified. The existence of several independent versions has made Görke and Schoeler conclude that the basic story must originate with ‘Urwa; he might have related it in different ways to the students he had over the years, or it might be that some of the transmitters have altered the story of their teacher. In a similar way, the two German scholars argue for the authenticity of all of ‘Urwa’s letters—not just the *hijra* letter—as well as for many the oral traditions that claim to go back to him, although both may have been altered at later stages.

Regarding the letters of ‘Urwa, Anthony (2020: 102–5) reaches the same conclusion about their genuineness by way of a different type of argument. To him, the content and structure of the texts, rather than an analysis of the *isnāds*, form the basis for his verdict. He argues that the terse character of the texts, which contrasts with later elaborated and embellished versions of Muḥammad’s biography, speaks in favour of an early date. Furthermore, he finds in the letters clear attempts to reconcile the two conflicting parties from the great schism between the Zubayrids and the Umayyads in the 680s, a schism in which ‘Urwa’s brother ‘Abdallāh ibn al-Zubayr played a major role. Such a mediation between the two conflicting parties would hardly have been of interest to later historians, according to Anthony.

The conclusion that the letters and oral traditions ascribed to ‘Urwa do actually go back to him does not of course automatically entail that the events described are historical: that they describe what actually happened during the time of the Prophet. Görke and Schoeler (2005: 219–20; 2008: 256–62) are well aware of this, but they argue that in the light of ‘Urwa’s relative proximity in time, and his kinship with Muḥammad’s wife ‘A’isha, his accounts probably give a “kernel” of the historical events of the Prophet’s life. Thus, they disagree with Crone’s statement, quoted above, that Ibn Isḥāq’s biography is the only source to the life of Muḥammad that is available to us.

The method used by Görke and Schoeler, as well as their conclusion, have been severely criticised by Stephen J. Shoemaker (2011). Without going into too much detail in Shoemaker’s rather technical argumentation, his main line of reasoning is that ‘Urwa’s letters are attested only (or almost only) in al-Ṭabarī’s works, and that several of the *isnāds* are suspicious and might well be inventions by al-Ṭabarī or one of his sources. Görke et al., (2012) together published a detailed response to

Shoemaker's critique. It is not possible for me here to go further into the technical arguments for and against the various positions, but I must admit that I find the three German scholars' response to Shoemaker quite convincing. Thus, although I do not at all perceive the discussion as having been resolved, I am for the moment prepared to accept Görke's and Schoeler's conclusion, that the rendering of the Abyssinian migration ascribed to 'Urwa probably originates from him. Less convincing in my view, however, are their arguments for the historicity of some of the events related, including the exile to Abyssinia. 'Urwa was probably born around 642 CE, about ten years after the death of Muḥammad; several decades had passed when he wrote his letters towards the end of the seventh and early eighth centuries. Thus, at least 70–80 years passed between the life of Muḥammad and the letters of 'Urwa. During this time, the mythology around the Prophet and the theological interpretations of his life were developed and became significant in the new conditions that arose with the rapid expansion of the new empire. This can be compared with the relation of the synoptic Gospels to the historical Jesus. These gospels were written 40–50 years after his crucifixion, and there is consensus among New Testament scholars that they give a story much adapted according to the needs of the early Church (Ehrman, 2016: 104–6, 240–1; Fredriksen, 2000: 3–4, 177). Therefore, given the considerably longer duration between the various events in the Prophet's life and 'Urwa's rendering of them, his letters must be read with great caution.

Görke and Schoeler are well aware about the timespan between Muḥammad and 'Urwa's description of his life, but they argue that 'Urwa is still close enough in time, and furthermore related to with Muḥammad's wife 'A'isha who informed him about the life of the Prophet. As I mentioned above, they hold that his accounts probably give a "kernel" of the historical events of the Prophet's life. On this point, I find their arguments much less convincing. First, there is no way to prove that 'A'isha actually did inform 'Urwa. Second, according to tradition, she was only a small child when the Abyssinian migration took place. Various dates are given for her birth, but according to most traditions, she was only one or two years old at the time.²³ In other words, we cannot know what an alleged transmission from 'A'isha to 'Urwa is worth. Instead, I suggest that the *ḥadīth* literature can be of help when trying to establish the historicity of the migration.

In contrast to 'Urwa's letters and traditions, I perceive the *ḥadīth* about the two *hijras* as much later. Very few variants exist, and those at least that I have come across have the same *isnād*. Furthermore, this *ḥadīth* deals with a problem that probably occurred only at a later stage: the classification of the Muslims for purposes of the distribution of allowances. Still, it *could* be an early tradition. It is not possible to make an *isnād-cum-matn* analysis of this tradition, as that method would require the existence and mutual comparison of a large number of variants of *matns* and their

²³ According to one tradition, however, she was six or seven years when the Abyssinian *hijra* took place. Tannous (2018: 300–1), who has a line of reasoning similar to mine regarding 'A'isha's trustworthiness as transmitter of *ḥadīths* bases his discussion on this tradition (without arguing for his position). For various, contradictory sources about 'A'isha's age, see Spellberg (1994: 197n4).

isnāds. For my argument, however, the precise time of origin of the *ḥadīth* does not really matter, as I will explain below.

Methodology

The two kinds of sources taken together, I argue, give reason to believe that the Abyssinian *hijra* actually occurred. From the first category, there are the traditions from ‘Urwa: his letter and the oral tradition in Ma‘mar’s biography. In both of these he gives brief descriptions of the Abyssinian *hijra*. From the second category of sources, I have discussed the long version of the *ḥadīth* about the two *hijras*.

I have acknowledged above that I tentatively accept Görke’s and Schoeler’s, as well as Anthony’s arguments about the authenticity of the traditions from ‘Urwa, although this does not automatically mean that I think they relate historical events. In other words, ‘Urwa’s description of the Abyssinian *hijra* cannot prove by itself that the event actually occurred. The *ḥadīth*, on the other hand, does, I think, contain a clue that argues for the historicity of the migration. As I mentioned above, this tradition probably originated in order to alleviate the tension between those companions of the Prophet who migrated across the sea and those who remained in Mecca. The latter seem to have regarded the migrants as cowards, or at least as easily misled, and thus not worthy of the same prestige as the group that remained. The migrants, on the other hand, are portrayed as indignant at such accusations and as claiming to have suffered just as much as the companions in Mecca. Even if the *ḥadīth* itself is late, the conflict between the two groups that it manifests is probably correct. Here, I think we can apply what historians often call “the criterion of embarrassment” (Meier, 1991: 168–71; Shoemaker, 2011: 322–5). This says that words, actions, and ideas that would cause embarrassment for, or go against the interests of the later community, are probably early. At a stage later in the history of a group, when a mythology and ideology about its foundations had already developed, it hardly creates traditions that contradict this. In this case, the *ḥadīth* highlights a matter of disunity among the early Believers, and this was not the picture that later Muslims wanted to convey. Divisions and fractions within the community was a fault that the Qur’ān and the early Believers accused other communities of, especially the Christians. They were keen to present the early community of Believers under the leadership of Muḥammad as united and harmonious, even though they were certainly aware of the conflicts in the decades after the death of the Prophet (van Ess 1991–1997: vol. IV, 696–700). It is hard to believe that the later community would have invented such a conflict. Thus, although the *ḥadīth* itself is probably later, there must have existed a tension between the migrants to Abyssinia and those that stayed behind in Mecca, otherwise the discussion about allowances from the treasure would never have occurred. This, in my view, is a strong argument that the migration to Abyssinia had actually occurred.

Conclusion

When I began this study, I was quite sure that it would be impossible to determine, from the sources available, whether the Abyssinian migration of the companions of the Prophet Muḥammad had occurred or not. As I started reading and analysing the sources and various previous studies, my opinion shifted, so that I now am inclined to believe that such a *hijra* likely happened. Further details of the later versions, however, such as the interactions of the migrants with the Negus himself, his conversion to Islam, and so on, are most probably later embellishments and political adaptations of an early, laconic narrative (Raven, 1988).

Notwithstanding, then, that all studies of historical events so far removed in time can only yield probabilities rather than hard facts, there is cause to believe that a group of the companions of Muḥammad did leave Mecca and spent some time in Abyssinia. As the sources suggest that Islam has roots also in Africa, and not on the Arabian Peninsula alone, there is good reason for African Muslims to be proud of the origin of their faith.

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Questioning the Archive

Islamic Legal Records and Social Histories of Muslims in Ethiopia and Eritrea



Jonathan Miran

Abstract Islamic (shari'a) court records and other legal documents are critical sources that historians draw on to reconstruct the social, economic, and cultural histories of societies in the Middle East and the wider Islamic world. Such records contain a wealth of material on diverse subjects such as the family, women, social stratification, slaves, property transfers, trade, urban–rural relations, urban space, crime, and many other aspects of social and economic life. After offering general critical observations about the advantages and limitations of such sources, I briefly survey the contribution of a number of studies that have drawn on Islamic legal records to reconstruct aspects of the histories of Muslim societies in Western and Eastern Africa. The remainder and larger part of the essay is devoted to a discussion of Islamic legal records as a source for the study of Muslim societies in Ethiopia and Eritrea. First, I present the Qadi/Diwan records of Harar and briefly discuss the work that has already made use of them. I then draw on my own experience to offer critical observations related to the Massawa court records. For both sets of sources I propose further propitious avenues to be taken in future work. I close the essay with a short description of two still unstudied sets of Islamic legal sources: a legal register containing the records of the Akils Court in Jigjiga (1942–43) and seven registers that I found in the functioning Islamic court in Massawa, covering various years between 1938 and 1996.

Keywords Ethiopia · Eritrea · Islam · Legal records · Shari'a court

Introduction

Notoriously neglected in the past, the study of Islam and Muslim societies in Ethiopia and Eritrea is witnessing important quantitative and qualitative growth in the past two decades. New research in archaeology, history, philology, and the social

J. Miran (✉)
Western Washington University, Bellingham, WA, USA
e-mail: Jonathan.Miran@wwu.edu

sciences, among other disciplines and fields, is making significant headway in shedding brighter light on the past and present paths, experiences, accomplishments, and contributions of Muslims in the Horn of Africa. Several recently completed and ongoing European Research Council (ERC) funded projects are promising to make giant, indeed revolutionary, leaps in reconstructing the religious, intellectual, and cultural traditions and historical trajectories of Muslims in this region. Critical aspects of such efforts is the reevaluation of known written sources, the collection and analysis of new textual materials such as manuscripts and a variety of archives, and the study of Muslim sites, mosques, architectural styles, burial grounds, epigraphs and sundry artifacts unearthed in archaeological excavations.¹ In the past decade, important work has focused on Muslims' written religious and literary traditions, throwing light on theological orientations, Sufi traditions and devotional literature, jurisprudence, poetry, Arabic, 'Ajami scripts, and other linguistic aspects, codicology, as well as the transmission of knowledge and the scholarly interactions between this region and the broader Muslim world.

My objective in this research note is to draw attention to another type of valuable source for reconstructing the social, economic, cultural and legal histories and practices of Muslims and their institutions in Ethiopia and Eritrea. These are Islamic court records (also referred to as *sharī'a* or *qāḍī* court records) and other legal documents, mostly in Arabic. Often dense and rich in information, legal records offer unique insights on myriad aspects of the social and economic life of ordinary people, mostly, though not exclusively, in Muslim urban communities. Importantly, such records are *local* and *locally-produced* sources, as opposed to European travel accounts, ethnographic descriptions and official reports, all too dominant in the study of Africa's pasts. In another context, that of Ottoman Palestine, for example, historian Beshara Doumani (1995: 9) observed that while Ottoman central archives and European consular reports and travel accounts mostly portray individuals and communities "as *objects* to be ordered, organized, taxed, conscripted, counted, ruled, observed and coopted," a local source such as Islamic court records allows us to see the inhabitants "as *subjects* who take an active role in the construction of their own history". Individuals presented themselves in court before a judge, entered into private contracts, registered transactions and property, promoted their interests, and claimed their rights. And though it is true that some social actors had greater access to the legal process compared to others, another glaring advantage of court records is that they shed light on individuals and groups that are usually either invisible or are perceived as marginal in the historical record: women, children, slaves, the poor, minority groups—including their daily interactions with members of other social groups.

¹ Three recent or ongoing ERC-funded projects are: *Islam in the Horn of Africa: A Comparative Literary Approach*, (2013–2018, led by Alessandro Gori); *Becoming Muslim: Conversion to Islam and Islamisation in Eastern Ethiopia*, (2016–2021, led by Timothy Insoll); *Horn and Crescent: Connections. Mobility and Exchange between the Horn of Africa and the Middle East in the Middle Ages*, (2017–2023, led by Julien Loiseau). Mention should also be made of archaeological projects undertaken in the early 2000s under the auspices and coordination of the Centre Français des Études Éthiopiennes (CFEE) in Addis Ababa.

In the context of Ethiopia and Eritrea, since the 1970s several scholars have used *qāḍī* court records in Arabic in their historical studies. Some of that work is remarkable, though little known. It nevertheless seems to me that the full research potential of extant and preserved records has not been exhausted, and it is possible that more court registers exist and await discovery in these two countries. At present, I know of the existence of a total of almost fifty registers in both Ethiopia (Harar and Jigjiga) and Eritrea (Massawa), the vast majority of which is not accessible, or not easily accessible, to researchers. They contain a total of a few thousand pages and date from 1825 to 1996. From a number of sources we know that many more registers existed before they were lost or destroyed in various circumstances in the middle decades of the last century. What I also know from my own fieldwork experience is that some functioning Islamic courts still keep old registers.

This note is therefore also an appeal for the identification and preservation of old legal court registers and other standalone court or *qāḍī*-issued legal documents that may be kept in law courts or indeed in private hands, among other family papers. My hope is that research students, young scholars, and very importantly, archivists in both countries will develop a deeper awareness to the importance of such non-literary sources and pay greater attention to their uncovering and preservation. It is possible that some archival and documentation centers, legal courts, government offices, mosques, and perhaps other institutions with repositories, libraries, or just spare rooms with unnoticed piling documents, may indeed include such materials at present.² But my appeal extends further to younger scholars outside of the field of Ethiopian-Eritrean studies proper. Renewed interest in northeast Africa's variegated historical relationships with the Middle East and the Muslim world is attracting a new generation of researchers equipped with singular linguistic skills, methodological competences, and a fresh awareness to transregional/transnational and comparative history that could hopefully revitalize work with Arabic legal records in this region.

Islamic Court Records as a Historical Source

Often referred to by the Arabic term *sijill* (Blois et al., 1996), Islamic court records and other legal documents are among the most important sources that historians use to reconstruct the social, economic, cultural and legal histories of societies in the Middle East and other areas of the Muslim world. These markedly *local* records contain a wealth of invaluable information on diverse subjects such as the family, social stratification, women, slaves, property transfers, urban–rural relations, urban space, pious endowments (*waqf*), violence and crime, and many other aspects of social and economic life. Pioneering efforts to use Ottoman court records from Sofia were made by Bulgarian and Polish scholars already in the early twentieth century

² On Islamic law in Ethiopia see a brief overview by Gori (2010). A useful source providing information on *sharī* a courts in twentieth century Ethiopia and Eritrea (until 1971) remains Singer (1971).

(Nieuważny, 2021: 9–10). But it was only in the 1960s and 1970s that such records became a major source for the study of the social, economic and cultural histories of the Ottoman Middle East and the Balkans. At that time, historians such as Jon E. Mandaville, Ronald C. Jennings, Abdul Karim Rafeq, André Raymond, Halil Inalcık and several other Turkish scholars used the wealth of information found in court records to study urban and rural economic activities, demographic trends, as well as marriage, divorce and inheritance practices, to reconstruct the histories of towns, cities and sometimes entire regions in the Ottoman Empire and its provinces (especially Turkey, Egypt, Syria and Palestine) between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries (Agmon & Shahar, 2008: 5–8).

Most social and economic historians used the court records in a positivist way, as a data bank of “facts” and information that recorded and reflected objective reality. Scholars usually employed quantitative or qualitative (narrative, microhistory) methodologies, or a combination of both. But in the 1990s, researchers influenced by new trends in social and cultural history (including the “cultural turn”), began to think about court records and related methodological aspects in more critical, self-reflexive and conceptually sophisticated ways. Such critique sharpened both the advantages and limitations of this source. Reassessments of *sijill*-based historical research cautioned historians not to take court records uncritically at face-value, stressing the gaps between actual occurrences in court and their written representations in the *sijill*. In addition, court records were perceived as “products of social institutions and, consequently, are encoded with the language or discourse of these institutions” (Doumani, 1995: 10).

Other interventions that critiqued *sijill*-based social history in the mid to late 1990s further stressed the inherent textuality of court records. Scholars such as Dror Ze’evi called for a more methodologically-informed approach that analyzes legal records within the context of their production and that understands legal texts as cultural artifacts. In other words, and in practice, the development of a more critical approach to *sijill*-based research required a closer study of legal institutions (*sharī’a* courts), their personnel (*qāḍīs*, court scribes), their practices and recording procedures, the social and cultural contexts in which they operated, and the often complex interdependence between law court and society (Agmon, 2006: 40–6; Agmon & Shahar, 2008: 12–15; Ze’evi 1998).

The adoption of such innovative critical approaches in conjunction with new trends in socio-legal history and legal anthropology in the past two decades has produced an ever more sophisticated body of work with court records. One fitting representation of new understandings of *sharī’a* records and socio-legal history is Beshara Doumani’s (2017: 48–9) elegant and penetrating characterization in his recent book: “[t]he registers of the court,” he observes, “are akin to a depository of the textual memory of urban communities. The interaction between the ‘people’ (*ahālī*) and their local court over the centuries produced a living and active archive that both mediated and constituted a discrete sociolegal space whose inhabitants, especially propertied individuals, came to share a common sense of community and territorial belonging”.

Among the many advantages of court records as a source for history is that they allow us to better appreciate how Islamic law was implemented, often *negotiated*, in specific settings, in the “real world”. *Qāḍīs* did not automatically and technically apply rules found in *fiqh* (jurisprudence) manuals, but actively participated, sometimes creatively, in crafting the legal process in particular settings and circumstances and under specific conditions. It is equally important to observe that not all disputes, or even transactions in a given society, appeared before the court. We must assume that some disputes were settled within families, communities and other social formations according to custom, which might explain why crimes appear overall less in court registers. Legal courts were sometimes sought only as a last resort. In other words, occurrences in courts did not always accurately represent a broader gamut of social relations in a given community.

It is also no secret that court records are not an easy source to work with: they require robust linguistic skills, knowledge of technical legal terms and concepts, and often involve painstaking labor in decrypting handwritten case summaries. Work with court records may demand a research temporality that can be daunting these days, as the neoliberal university expects ever more speedy research output. One way to address this challenge is to collaborate with another scholar (or more than one), preferably with skills (linguistic, disciplinary) that can complement one’s own competencies. Another way is to limit the scope of investigation to a more restricted topic or by drawing on a smaller sample of cases or even a single register. Such strategies, obviously, come with their own limitations. And in the context of African history, they are almost inevitable, given the smaller bodies of source material that are available.

An additional hurdle for historians working with *sijillāt* is that the disjointed information gleaned from them may prove baffling when basic knowledge, background, context or general historiography of specific settings is inadequate or lacking. So though court records usually offer summaries of legal cases that contain finely grained high resolution snapshots of social and economic phenomena, it can be frustratingly challenging to incorporate this information into a larger historical reconstruction. It is not my intention to be discouraging, but these obstacles should not be ignored.

Islamic Legal Records as a Source for African History

Although the vast majority of *sijill*-based historical research centers on the Ottoman Empire and its provinces, a variety of Islamic legal records have been used as sources in historical research in other parts of the Muslim world. This is also the case in sub-Saharan Africa where a handful of historians with knowledge of Arabic have located court registers and other legal documents—mostly from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—in national and institutional archives or in private libraries and collections (Dickerman et al., 1990; Hunwick, 2005). Interestingly, in most, if not all cases described below, it was European colonial administrations that instituted record keeping in Muslim courts in this period. Though quantitatively not abundant,

these local sources offer unique perspectives and insights into the social histories of African Muslims across the continent. Taken together, what emerges as the most important area that the study of Islamic court records in Africa has thus far contributed to is the question of Muslim African women's legal and economic agency. In what follows, I briefly survey studies that have made use of single or multiple volumes of serial court records, as opposed to other legal documents.³

In West Africa, an exhaustive and pioneering study of court registrations is Allan Christelow's (1994) close analysis of the early twentieth century records of the Emir of Kano's (northern Nigeria) judicial council. Christelow scrutinized a particular record book (May 1913–November 1914) that included more than 2,000 cases to analyze multiple aspects of social and property relations, including theft and murder, in the Kano emirate in the early years of British indirect rule. He also published an important selection of case summaries in translation as well as facsimiles of the originals.⁴ Though I am not sure whether they have been studied or not, other court registers of the *alkalai* (Muslim judges, in Hausa) from 1910 onwards are also preserved in Kaduna and Kano (Dickerman et al., 1990: 310–11). Other judicial records in Arabic are found in Senegal, with its complex judicial institutional history under French rule. The Muslims' Tribunal of Saint-Louis includes registers from its foundation in 1857 to the 1950s (but only until 1911 in Arabic). Most cases revolve around the family: dowry, divorce, neglect and inheritance (Dickerman et al., 1990: 313). Ghislaine Lydon (2007, 2010) studied marital disputes and women's divorce litigation and settlements based on a sample of cases from the 1880s to the 1920s. In neighboring Gambia, historian Bala Saho studied the *qāḍī*s' court records of colonial Bathurst (Banjul) between 1905 and 1965. Analyzing mostly divorce, child custody, and inheritance cases brought before the court, Saho explored women's utilization of the court system to promote their rights in the domestic sphere (Saho, 2018).

In East Africa, Elke Stockreiter (2015) made extensive use of samples drawn from a set of kadhi's (*qāḍī*) court records in Arabic from Zanzibar Town covering the period 1900–1963 and preserved in the Zanzibar National Archives. Stockreiter analyzed women's and former slaves' legal and socio-economic agency especially in the areas of marriage, property and divorce. She showed that women and freed slaves frequently used the Muslim court to promote their economic interests and secure their legal rights. Indeed, the records show how post-abolition Zanzibari women of all walks of life conducted a variety of business transactions and actively engaged with the court.

A remarkable example of *siyill*-based research in Sub-Saharan Africa is located in our broader region, in southern Somalia. In 2006, Alessandra Vianello and Mohamed M. Kassim published two hefty volumes comprising Arabic transliterations and English translations of 1924 legal acts found in the *Qāḍī*'s Record Book of the

³ I am not addressing here numerous other historically-valuable legal documents such as contracts, property ownership, land charters, slave manumission and endowment deeds, wills, and *fatwa* collections, including from pre-colonial Africa, found, for example, in archives and documentation centers in Timbuktu, Khartoum or Zanzibar.

⁴ Drawing on cases in these records, Christelow (1985, 1987, 1991) published a string of articles on slavery, women, property, land rights, theft, and violence.

town of Brava, situated on the Benadir coast. The register covers the period between 20 November 1893 and 28 July 1900 and includes summaries of civil lawsuits as well as a large variety of private transactions (real estate, slaves, cattle, camels), donations, acknowledgement of debt, power of attorney, the establishment of family endowments, inheritance, bankruptcy, and marriage and divorce (Vianello & Kassim, 2006). In recent years, Vianello, one of the editors, together with Lidwien Kapteijns, have co-authored two articles drawing on the abundant material included in this source. The first focused on the legal and economic agency of women in Brava, and the second article examined slaves and urban slavery in Brava immediately before slavery was abolished there in 1903 (Kapteijns & Vianello, 2017, 2020).

Arabic Court Records in Ethiopia and Eritrea

Qāḍī courts with recording practices have long been in existence in Harar and Massawa, Ethiopia and Eritrea's foremost historic Muslim cities (Wagner, 2010). Compared to other settings in sub-Saharan Africa, a unique characteristic of court records in these two locales is the existence of registers that date back to the pre-European colonial period. In what follows I offer some information about the records, including remarks on their contents and on how scholars have approached them, both methodologically and thematically. In addition, I provide cursory information on two yet unstudied sets of materials from Massawa and Jigjiga.

Harar

At present, the oldest extant Islamic court records known in Ethiopia and Eritrea are from Harar. They are also the most studied to date. The Harari *qāḍī* court records are preserved at the Institute of Ethiopian Studies (IES) in Addis Ababa. At the time of writing, seven digitized codices (Ethiopian Manuscript Imaging Project) have been made available online on the British Library's Endangered Archives Programme (EAP) website.⁵

A remarkable reference to *sijill* record keeping in the independent city-state (Until 1875) is found in the manuscript known as *Jadwal al-Shāsh wa-l-Shāmī*, completed by the Harari scholar Aḥmad al-Shāmī in 1954. One of the undated documents that al-Shāmī includes in the *Jadwal* refers to Amīr 'Abd al-Shakūr b. Yūsuf who ruled Harar in the years 1197–1209 AH /1783–1794 CE and whose accomplishments include the reinstatement of its chancery (*dīwān*) and judicial record keeping (*sijill*) after a long period of neglect (possibly two centuries). The text offers quoteworthy comments on the general rationale behind these institutions and their perceived benefits to society:

⁵ The records are accessible at <https://eap.bl.uk> (last accessed on 23 October 2023).

Because the creation of a register [*sijill*] and a chancery [*dīwān*] belongs to the rights of the people, to which the cadis [*qāḍī's*] and the sultans of the Arabs and non-Arabs in all countries are obliged, for it prevents injustice and dissention by keeping in memory for all times, how by it [i.e. the register and chancery] the judicial decisions made effective the Holy Law—may God strengthen it—and [by keeping in memory] what was settled of that which nobody should be free from being strictly bound to it, may it be the dowry or anything else, so that a demand should not be repeated and dissent should not arise among people, especially in the land of Harar [...] (Wagner, 1974: 218).

The text goes on to describe the state of confusion resulting from the abandonment and neglect of these institutions by the Amīr's predecessors and which, the text claims, existed in Harar long before them.

As far as I can understand, as part of a broader documentation collection project conducted around 1970, researchers Volker Stitz and Richard Caulk found four Arabic registers from the *qāḍī's dīwān* in the archives of Harar's provincial administration, photographed them and eventually brought the actual volumes to the IES library.⁶ These were catalogued as IES 955, 956, 957, and 958 and cover years between 1827 and 1870, prior to the Egyptian occupation (1875–85). There are four other registers at IES library catalogued as IES 959, 960, 961 and 962, covering the years of the Egyptian occupation.⁷

In 1975, the very year of his premature death, Volker Stitz presented a paper drawing on some of the registers. In rather brief fashion but with the scholarly prowess that characterized him, Stitz provided some exceptionally penetrating observations based on his relatively limited examination of the records. He swiftly grasped their potential for studying Harari social and economic life, including subjects such as Harari families, prosopography, marriage, divorce, inheritance, family size and population levels, property, land, commodities traded and changes in the value of money over time (Stitz, 1975).

In the 1980s, Abdurahman Garad took up the more economic and commercial themes in his extensive doctoral dissertation (University of Gießen) on the economic history of Harar in the nineteenth century (Garad, 1990). Focusing on the four older registers (mss. IES 955–958), Abdurahman selected a sample of cases found in 261 pages (of a total 1174 pages) across the years 1827–70. Methodologically, he adopted the approach of other economic historians working in the 1980s on the Ottoman Empire and its provinces. Abdurahman's study is structured around four sections titled (1) political and social foundations of the economy, (2) the material culture of the city's inhabitants, (3) the Emirate's internal and external trades, and (4) foundations of wealth management and finance. By examining selected cases, Abdurahman was able to glean high resolution information about land ownership, artisans, markets,

⁶ The vast majority of materials microfilmed during that campaign was post 1887 records, including civil court records in Amharic from the 1910s and 1920s. On the challenges of working with these records see Carmichael (2006: 26–9).

⁷ For a list of the Harari records housed at IES see Gori (2014: 19–20). Unexplainably, IES 956 is not included there. For information about the Harar *sijill* volumes see also the references to Stitz, Abdurahman Garad, and Muna Abubeker, as well as snippets of information in Caulk (1977: 374) and Zekaria (1997: 22–3).

prices, traders and trade routes, taxes, government revenues, inflation, wages, Harari currencies and currency reform, inheritance (from estate inventories), credit, as well as other aspects of Harar's economy. At the time of its publication, Abdurahman's dissertation—its subject, source material, and methodology—was a unique work of its kind in the field of Ethiopian history. Regrettably, its publication in German did not help it reach a wide enough readership.⁸

In more recent years, Muna Abubeker Ibrahim and Adam Nieuważny, studied closely four of the known Harar registers for their advanced degree theses. Their works bring us closer to a more accurate description of the records, including the precise years that they cover, the number of pages/cases that they contain, their contents, as well as other questions pertaining to codicology, linguistic features and characteristics, as well as recording practices. This is a welcome development, since the information gleaned from the older literature, the IES library catalog, and a recently compiled handlist, is incomplete and includes unresolved discrepancies and puzzles that can only be addressed by a close, comprehensive and methodical examination of all available registers.

In her Master's thesis defended in 2007, Muna Abubeker Ibrahim (2007) chose to focus on women's social, economic and legal agency in nineteenth century Harar. Like Abdurahman Garad, she opted to work with the older registers and selected samples from three of them (IES 955, 956, 957). Concentrating on cases recording marriage, divorce, inheritance, and economic transactions, Muna found evidence to Harari women's access to property, in many cases acquired through inheritance or dowry. Women also either appeared in person in court, or they could appoint a *wakīl* (proxy) to represent them; in some cases they appealed to the *qādī* to uphold their rights in inheritance matters. The records also show that in addition to *ṭalāq* (repudiation), other types of divorce such as *faskh* and *khul'*, where the wife initiates the dissolution of the marriage, were frequently brought to court. As a philology student, Muna described the *ṣijill* register, its materiality, recording practices, as well as linguistic aspects.

Muna took this research further in her doctoral thesis defended in 2017 (Abubeker, 2017). There she provides an annotated translation (but no transliteration) of an entire single *qādī* register (IES 955) covering ten years (1242–52 AH/1827–37 CE) and including 2197 cases altogether. This is a praiseworthy feat and will be of great service to social historians of Ethiopia and Harar in particular. In this work, Muna examines the physical, textual and linguistic features and characteristics of the manuscript. The themes found in the register are already familiar from past studies: inheritance and estate division (*tarikā*), a variety of transactions of real estate and moveable properties, marriage (including types of dowry) and divorce (*ṭalāq*, *faskh* and *khul'*) as well as trusts/deposits (*wadī'a*), donations, house rentals and cases of litigation. There are also interesting references to converts to Islam, enslaved and freed individuals, names, titles, currencies, and commodities. In addition, Muna included an extensive 61 page long index of personal names appearing in the register with relevant page numbers. By studying an entire register, rather than select samples, we are offered a

⁸ The only review that I could find was published in the *Rassegna di Studi Etiopici* (Ricci 1991).

larger data set that allows for more accurate quantification for the ten years covered. I can only hope that the thesis will soon be published and made more widely available to researchers. I also hope that additional efforts, similar to Muna's, will tackle the other registers in the Harari *sijill* archive.

Even more recently, Adam Nieuważny (2021) offered a detailed description of three codices from the Egyptian period (IES 959, 961, 962) in his Master's thesis defended in Warsaw. Nieuważny (*ibidem*: 7) studied "the language, composition, structure and orthographical features" of the documents and also offered preliminary observations about their contents in view of their exploitation as a source for historical research. Nieuważny found that IES 961, covering the years 1881–82, included marriage contracts between Egyptian soldiers based in Harar and local women. The record identified as IES 962, covering the years, 1882–85, also included marriage contracts, together with cases pertaining to inheritance disputes, sales contracts and criminal cases. The third register, shelfmarked IES 959, covering the years 1878–79, includes divorce and slave manumission registrations. Nieuważny goes on to expertly explore multiple aspects of the codices such as dating, structure, pagination, authorship, language, vocabulary in multiple languages, orthography, spelling, ligatures, and abbreviations. Fortunately and promisingly, Nieuważny is currently at work on these materials for his doctoral thesis, aiming to prepare an edition and translation of the registers together with an analysis of their contents.

Massawa

Compared to the records from Harar, the Massawa court registers are far less accessible and as a result, less studied. My initial awareness to the existence of the records dates back to 1998, when as a doctoral student I was laboring to unearth and gather historical sources for my projected research on Massawa's history. I found references to such records in Tom Killion's *Historical Dictionary of Eritrea* noting the existence of 101 volumes dating back to the late 1700s (this later turned out to be inaccurate) and housed in the Islamic Institute Library in Asmara (Killion, 1998: 456, 492). Months before my arrival to Eritrea for fieldwork research, I sent a letter to the Mufti of Eritrea requesting to consult the registers. When I arrived to Asmara in the summer of 1999 I was glad to learn that the Awqaf Council, in charge of the Islamic Institute Library, had decided to grant me access to the old Massawa registers.

The registers were kept in the Awqaf Council secretary's office, inaccessible to regular library users, and I had to coordinate my visits with him. I ended up coming to consult the registers approximately a dozen times, laboring to decrypt the small handwritten summaries in the volumes and taking photographs, always under the secretary's leery gaze. The office cum library, so I quickly learned, used to be the office of Shaykh Ibrāhīm al-Mukhtār (1909–1969), Eritrea's first Grand Mufti and a towering figure for Eritrea's Muslims. As it happens, it was the late Mufti himself who salvaged the leather bound registers over which I was poring. During an inspection tour in Massawa in June 1943, he first came across 102 old registers dating from the

Ottoman period up to 1943. Years later, in the late 1950s, under Ethiopian rule, he reported having personally witnessed the destruction of numerous registers with the exception of 29, which he took with him to Asmara. Not only did Shaykh Ibrāhīm organize, number and label the volumes, he also studied and drew information from them for his research on the history and development of Eritrea's Islamic institutions, including its *qāḍīs* and *muftīs* (al-Mukhtār 1958: 72–97).

Of the 29 extant registers (see Appendix I), 18 date to the period under the Egyptian administration (1865–85), six to the Italian period (1885–1901) and four other volumes cover years on both sides of 5 February 1885, the day Italian forces occupied the port town (Habib, 1973: 43–6; Miran, 2001). One of the volumes is the register of Massawa's last *muftī*, 'Abd Allāh Sirāj ibn 'Alī Abū 'Ilāmā, dating to 1900–1901 (Miran, 2009a: 200–7). The logic of the sequence of the register archive (ordered first by the Italians, then by the Mufti) is not entirely clear to me and would require further methodical examination. As far as contents go (see Appendix II), some registers contain summaries of litigations, disputes, and arbitration involving a wide variety of cases mostly about property, as well as several cases of theft, murder, violations of contracts, misunderstandings between foreigners and their local servants, and conflicts over inheritance.

But the vast majority of cases includes marriage and divorce acts, proxy, slave manumission, inheritance, legal wills, appointment of legal guardianship, child support, death acts, estate inventories, conversions to Islam, gifts, loans, debts, and the administration of *waqf*. Real estate property transactions are particularly abundant in the final decades of the nineteenth century, teaching us quite a bit about urban development. The *qāḍī* notarized the sale and purchase of houses, coffee shops, stores, water cisterns and the court issued title deeds to property owners. Some registers appear to have served as a type of "official gazette" into which government edicts or translations of official letters were copied. One register, for example, reproduces the correspondence between the Governor's office and the court. Several registers reproduce the various certificates issued by the court, mainly property title deeds and manumission acts. The majority of acts are usually authenticated by personal seals with the names of the *qāḍī*, *muftī*, judicial council members, and/or witnesses present at court.

At this point, a few observations about my own work with the records are in order. A first point to make is that the discovery of the Massawa *sijill* archive in Asmara evoked in me both great excitement and some anxiety. Though I immediately saw the great potential of this source, I also felt insecure about my ability to make good use of it in the limited time that a doctoral dissertation allows for. And although I possessed an ability to work with Arabic, my training as an Africanist historian had not prepared me to work with challenging handwritten Arabic court records requiring dedicated skills and technical knowledge in Islamic law to make efficient use of them in good time. I was fortunate to discover that many of the registers from the Egyptian period included tables of content (or a list of cases included in the register with the date, names of parties involved and nature of the case). These were prepared in the Italian colonial period and attached at the beginning of the register; they are usually in both Arabic and Italian. Apparently, the Italian authorities referred to

the registers while attempting to settle disputes over property, especially following a devastating earthquake that occurred in Massawa in 1888. The contents tables proved crucial since they allowed me to identify cases more quickly and discern some useful patterns and paths to pursue.

I decided to work on ten of the 29 registers, covering 1866–85.⁹ My approach and methodology consisted of (1) extracting *information* about people, places, institutions and activities from the case summaries, (2) identifying individuals and groups of social actors with similar characteristics for *prosopographical* analysis, and (3) *quantification*—usually on relatively small samples—allowing me to discern patterns, identify trends, fluctuations and changes. Since the focus of my study was society in Massawa, on a very basic level, the records provided me with a large databank of information on a variety of social actors: office holders, artisans, foreigners, members of minority groups (e.g. Indians, Greeks, ‘Christians’), local and sojourning merchants and others. Different titles (*sayyid*, *sharīf*) and/or *nisbas* (attribution) attached to individuals’ names, or even typical name structures (e.g. Hadramis) offered information on origins, ethnicity, place of residence, affiliation or roles in Sufi orders (*khalīfa*, *muqaddam*), and occupations. In some instances I was able to identify the ancestors of individuals that I was interviewing, which proved helpful for reconstructing family histories.

At the heart of my research were Massawa’s prominent families who drew their social prestige and political power from a variety of sources, be they economic capital, religious status, or association with governing powers. A prosopographic method allowed me to examine some of the common underpinnings of high-status families, their kin ties, alliances, marriage strategies, patterns of property acquisition, capital accumulation and their rapport to political power. A variety of court cases also allowed me to explore the ways by which newly settled entrepreneurs were able to integrate into Massawan society (“become local”) and its upper echelons (“become elites”). Though trajectories of decline could also be identified, for example in cases of sale of family properties to up-and-coming entrepreneurs after inheritance division. Women also appear in the records—they bought and sold property, participated in other economic activities and exercised legal agency. Marriage and divorce acts involving both high and lower status individuals also reveal meaningful patterns and trends. I believe that a more focused examination of women in the records, including litigations and disputes which I have not consulted at all, would allow for a more extensive and deeper assessment of women and gender relations in Massawa in this period.

The records offer information on numerous other subjects such as the Islamic institution of *waqf* (pious endowments). *Waqfs* are endowments for charitable purposes (*waqf khayrī*), usually involving the donation of a plot of land or a building for Muslim pious or charitable purposes (e.g. a mosque, an Islamic school, a cemetery). But there are also family *waqfs* (*waqf ahlī*), which are endowments that benefit one’s children or family. *Waqf* cases offer insights into the texture of family, community as well as Massawa’s public spaces and local urban environment. An analysis of a number of

⁹ The work culminating from this and other research is Miran (2009a).

cases in the records shows how recently-settled Hadrami and Egyptian entrepreneurs in Massawa utilized the institution of *waqf* as one of several strategies in integrating into the town and building their socio-political power on the urban scene. Indeed, patronage through endowment served as one of several ways to acquire symbolic capital in the processes of integration into Massawa's institutional structures and the development of political authority and power. *Waqf* cases also teach us about religious edifices and institutions, and the urban landscape more broadly (Miran, 2009b). And though merchants, entrepreneurs and other privileged actors are probably over-represented in their access to the law court, my exploration of society in Massawa was not limited to its favored families. The records include numerous acts of manumission that provide information on the places of origin, ethnic identities, gender and age of hundreds of enslaved individuals, mostly teenagers, liberated in Massawa by private owners or by the Egyptian administration (Miran, 2013 and Appendix IV). I have no doubt that a dedicated study of the records, including those registers that I have not looked at, would yield more information about urban slavery in Massawa. In addition, comparison with the Harar manumission registrations should also be interesting to explore.

To conclude, there is no doubt that the Massawa *sijill* archive remains a source with much potential for further research. In my opinion, the most important and probably promising type of cases that I have not explored and that would be fascinating to study are criminal cases, lawsuits, and litigations. But there are many other areas that could receive attention: the application of Islamic law by *qāḍīs* and the role of customary law in the legal process, if indeed it had a role; economic and commercial aspects; greater attention to women and gender, as well as a variety of relationships: urban–rural, Muslim–non Muslim, rich–poor. Finally, it would obviously be advantageous to follow the example of our colleagues working with the Brava and Harar *sijills* to produce a transliteration, translation and edition of one or more registers.

I have no information about the existence of serial Islamic court records preserved at the Research and Documentation Center (RDC), Eritrea's national archives, though it is possible. I do know that some Islamic legal documents such as wills are found in the Italian notarial archive (*Archivio Notarile*), constituting part of the RDC collections in Asmara (Miran & Layish, 2018). I can only hope that efforts to preserve historical materials of this nature from other areas in Eritrea are underway. I am certain that they exist, as I witnessed in the year 2000 when visiting the functioning Islamic court in Massawa (on Tewalet) (See Appendix III). There, I found seven registers on the shelves, covering the years 1938–96. One of the registers covers about six months in the late Italian colonial period (5 November 1938–25 April 1939). A quick perusal of the register reveals members of many families that I have encountered in the Egyptian-era *sijill* more than a half a century earlier. Massawa appears more cosmopolitan than ever in this register, disclosing myriad translocal connections with *nisbas* from India to Turkey to West Africa and specific place names in Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Sudan, Ethiopia and the Red Sea archipelagos (Dahlak, Kamaran, Farasan) associated with those appearing in court.

Jigjiga

Here i make brief mention of a register from the Akils' Court of Jigjiga preserved at IES in Addis Ababa (ms. IES 975). The *akils* ("wise men," traditional clan chiefs) were initially employed in different districts of British Somaliland as arbitrators. In 1921 they were integrated into the Akils' Court Ordinance as members of district native courts with a minimum quorum of three and a full court of five members. The Akils' Court was limited to settle civil disputes as a court of first instance in matters such as petty violence, insult, petty theft, and acting as an advisory council to the District Court. The court was allowed "to enquire into and decide (a) any point of native law and custom, (b) any question relating to the value of *yarad* (bridewealth) or *dibaad* (dowry) paid or to be paid, (c) any matter affecting the value or amount of stock or property transferred or paid over, or alleged to have been transferred, or paid over, on account of a tribal or other settlement" (Lewis, 1961: 166, 169; Wright, 1943: 69).

In 1942, a year after their occupation of Jigjiga, the British established an Akils' Court to deal with "Somali cases." The *akils* were appointed by the British and the court operated alongside and independent of the Ethiopian judicial system, resulting in tensions and divisions, especially in cases involving Muslims and Christians. The British insisted that cases involving Muslims should be directed to the Akils' Court. To add to the legal confusion, it seems that there was also a British-appointed *qāḍī* who administered Islamic law in town (Eshete, 2014: 41–2; Pankhurst, 1946: 7; Rodd, 1948: 201). In addition to judicial aspects, it is obvious that any worthwhile examination of the records would necessitate contextualization in the political, social and economic history of mid-twentieth century Jigjiga (begin with Barnes, 2004).

The register covers six and a half months (7 October 1942–26 April 1943) and consists of 180 pages. One can count a total of ca. 335 cases of which 172 are written in English (sometimes with an Arabic version on the opposite page) and ca. 163 case summaries that have been written only in Arabic. Case summaries are usually short, though not always. They include a case number, date, the names of the plaintiff and the defendant, usually with identifying markers (clan, sub-clan, "Arabian," "Abyssinia"), a description of the case, and the ruling of the court. The cases cover issues that revolve around theft of property, theft, claims, *diya* (blood money, compensation), and violence. For example: theft of goods (cloth, sorghum, clothes, khat, tires, blanket, tin off ghee, sheets, *lungi* [sarong] *gorgora* [skirt]); theft of animals (donkey, camels, bullocks, cows, horses); theft of money; claims (women, *diya*, animals, money, unpaid debt, truck, pistol, cases of cigarettes, gold necklace, plot of land, a clock, bags of salt, cases of soap); fighting and violence.

Appendix 1. Massawa Islamic Court Records (MICR), 1866–1901 (Summary)

<i>Register No</i>	<i>Period covered</i>	<i>Written pages</i>
1	1880	42
2	1880–1881	71
3	1876–1881	10
4	1881–1885	115
5	1879–1880	18
6	1880	2
7	1881–1885	69
8	1881–1884	118
9	1877–1880	55
10	1885	42
11	1866–1876	32
12	1886–1890	88
13	1881–1886	60
14	1866–1880	90
15	1893	3
16	1866–1877	118
17	1882–1885	ca. 10
(?) illegible	1878	ca. 8
(?) illegible	1882	(?)
(?) illegible	1883	ca. 10
(?) illegible	1883	ca. 30
[One volume missing from expected sequence?]		
23	1884	ca. 18
24	1884	ca. 20
25	1884	ca. 22
26	1885	ca. 44
27	1887	2
28	1886–1888	ca. 31
29	ca.1900–1901	ca.150

Total: ca. 1278 pages

Appendix 2: MICR, 1866–1901 (Dates/Contents)

Note: The numbering of the register follows the order established by the Grand Mufti of Eritrea, Shaykh Ibrāhīm al-Mukhtār, in the early 1960s.

Register 1	[30 March 1880–? (19 Rabī ‘ II 1297–?)]
	(42 written pages)
	CONTENTS: various lawsuits (<i>da’awā</i>).
Register 2	[30 March 1880–6 June 1881 (19 Rabī ‘ II 1297–9 Rajab 1298)].
	(ca. 71 pages)
	CONTENTS: rulings (<i>aḥkām</i>), verdicts (<i>khitābāt</i>)
Register 3	[13 May 1876–9 February 1881 (18 Rabī‘ II 1293–10 Rabī‘ I 1298)]
	(10 pages)
	CONTENTS: various testimonies/witnesses (<i>ishhādāt mukhtalifa</i>), conversions to Islam (<i>ishhādāt al-islām</i>), slave manumission (‘ <i>itq</i>), inheritance (<i>mīrāth</i>), divorce acts (<i>ṭalāq</i>).
Register 4	[7 July 1881–4 September 1885 (10 Sha‘bān 1298–24 Dhū ‘l-qa‘da 1302)]
	(115 pages)
	CONTENTS: sales/transactions (<i>mubaya‘āt</i>), relinquishment of claims (<i>isqātāt</i>), gifts (<i>hibba</i>), pawn/pledge (<i>rahn</i>), substitutions (<i>abdāl</i>), proxies (<i>tawkilāt</i>), inheritance, divorce, slave manumission, legal guardianship (<i>walaya</i>), maintenance (<i>nafaqa</i>), endowments (<i>waqf</i>), conversions to Islam, property deeds.
Register 5	[21 July 1879–27 March 1880 (1 Sha ‘bān 1296–16 Rabī ‘ II 1297)].
	(18 pages)
	CONTENTS: lawsuits (<i>da’awā</i>)
Register 6	[29 March 1880 (18 Rabī ‘ II 1297)]
	(2 pages)
	CONTENTS: inheritance, taxes.
Register 7	[10 June 1881–25 November 1885 (13 Rajab 1298–18 Šafar 1303)]
	(69 pages)
	CONTENTS: a variety of entries of all types.
Register 8	[May 1881–29 December 1884 (? Rajab 1298–11 Rabī ‘ I 1302)]
	(118 pages)
	CONTENTS: divorce acts (<i>ṭalāq</i>), slave manumission (‘ <i>itq</i>), sales (<i>bayī’</i>), power of attorney (<i>tawkilāt</i>), debt registrations (<i>dayn</i>), legal wills (<i>wišāya</i>), pawn/pledge
Register 9	[4 April 1877–27 February 1880 (20 Rabī‘ I 1294–16 Rabī‘ I 1297)]
	(55 pages)
	CONTENTS: real estate transactions.
Register 10	[11 January 1885–26 November 1885 (24 Rabī‘ I 1302–19 Šafar 1303)]
	(42 pages)

(continued)

(continued)

	CONTENTS: real estate transactions, rental contracts (<i>ijārah</i>), purchases/sales, divorce acts, slave manumission, proxy, legal wills, inheritance, confessions (<i>aqṛār</i>), death registrations, legal guardianship, property division, receipts.
Register 11	[19 November 1866–9 Dec. 1876 (11 Rajab 1283–23 Dhū ‘l-qa‘da 1293)] (32 pages) CONTENTS: legal wills, estate inventories, legal guardianship, inheritance registrations, slave manumission, maintenance, appointment of waqf administrator (<i>nāẓir</i>)
Register 12	[28 January 1886–25 January 1890 (22 Rabi‘ II 1303–4 Jumādā II 1307)] (88 pages) CONTENTS: real estate transactions, proxy.
Register 13	[1880/81–1885/86 (1298–1303)]. (ca. 60 pages) CONTENTS: various letters sent to the Governorate office.
Register 14	[6 November 1866–10 April 1880 (27 Jumādā II 1283–29 Rabi‘ II 1297)] (90 pages) CONTENTS: contracts (<i>‘uqūdāt</i>), marriage, divorce acts, slave manumission.
Register 15	[28 January 1893–? (10 Rajab 1310)]. (3 pages) CONTENTS: slave manumission.
Register 16	[9 December 1866–13 May 1877 (1 Sha‘bān 1283–29 Rabi‘ II 1294)] (ca. 118 pages) CONTENTS: real estate transactions, title deeds, waqf, transfer of ownership, sale of moveable property (fishing boats).
Register 17–28	[ca. 1877–1889]. CONTENTS: These eleven registers (one apparently missing) are in some disorder and have not been thoroughly examined. They range from volumes with 2 to 44 pages long. The total number of pages is ca. 200. They include correspondence, lawsuits, sentences, decrees.
Register 29	[1900–1901]. (ca. 150 pages) CONTENTS: Records of the mufti of Massawa, ‘Abd Allāh Sirāj b. ‘Alī Abū ‘Ilāmā (b.1845–d.1901). The register is falling apart. Some pages are not in original order.

Appendix 3. Registers seen in the functioning Islamic Court in Massawa (on Tewalet) in the year 2000

Register 1: 1938–39 (80 pages); 1947–1948 (11 p.); 1945 (18 p.)

Register 2: 1968–96 (vol. no. 116): Conversions to Islam (*al-dukhūl fī'l-Islām*) (68 p.)

Register 3: early 1970s (vol. no. 101): Inheritance (*mīrāth*) (199 p.)

Register 4: 1964–69 (vol. no. 109): Real estate, donations (*'iqār wa-hibba*) (c.130 p.)

Register 5: 1975–95 (vol. no. 128): Divorce (*talāqāt*) (c.210 p.)

Register 6: 1976–82 (vol. no. 131): Legal statements (*shahadāt shari' iyya*) (c.300 p.)

Register 7: 1985–92 (vol. no. 120): Divorce (*talāqāt*) (c.277 p.)

Appendix 4. Four Slave Manumission Registrations from MICR¹⁰

Sample I

The female slave whose name is Faḍl Wāsi ', who belongs to 'Abd Allāh Yūsuf Ṣā'igh from Massawa, presented herself to the court. She is black, medium height and slim. She is hereby freed by the government manumitter in accordance with governmental decrees. 'Umar Aḥmad, a government official, brought her with him to the court. This took place in 7 Ṣafar 1299 and accordingly no one has any right of ownership on her. And we issued this document for her, to avoid any potential dispute. 7 Ṣafar 1299. She is sent in the company of Rifqī to the Governorate (Fig. 1).

Sample II

The honorable Shumāta Afandī 'Alawī, son of the honorable Ḥarb, 2nd Lieutenant of the Artillery [battalion?] attached to the governorate of Massawa, presented himself to court and attested that his female slave 'Ā 'isha bint 'Abdū al-Ḥabashī is free for

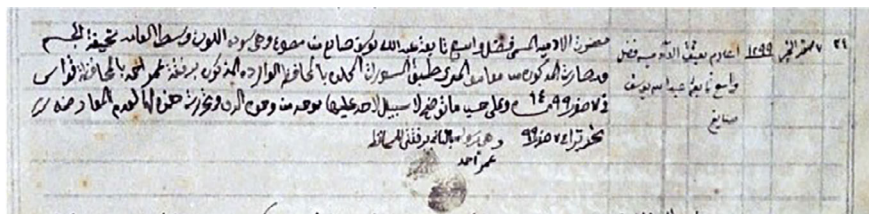


Fig. 1 Sample I. *Source* Massawa Islamic Court Record [MICR] 8/13a (7 Ṣafar 1299 / 28 December 1881)

¹⁰ English translation, followed by copy of original in Arabic.

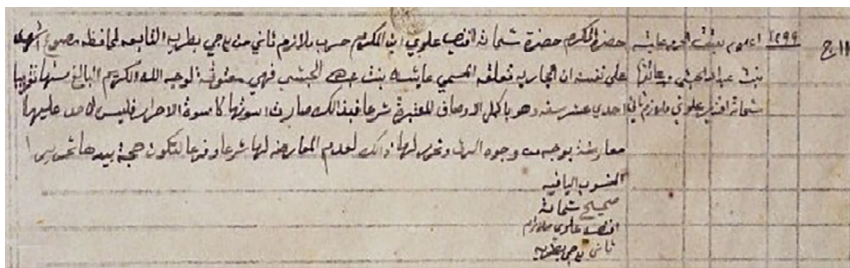


Fig. 2 Sample II. Source [MICR 8/23b (11 Jumādā II 1299 / 30 April 1882)]

the sake of Allāh. She is about 11 years old and he [the manumitter] fulfills all the legal obligations and is responsible according to the Sharī ‘a. Accordingly, she has become equal among the free and no one may oppose this decision in any way. And this decision has been released for her in order to avoid any dispute, legally or on the part of any private person. The document that has been delivered to her constitutes proof of her freedom (Fig. 2).

Sample III

In the presence of the witnesses, Shaykh Muḥammad Ādam son of the late Ādam ibn Maḥmūd from Massawa presented himself to court. He is legally responsible.

He freed the slave Almās al-Ḥabashiyya in accordance with the Sharī ‘a for the sake of the generous Allāh and following the Prophet, Peace be Upon Him, who said that any man who frees a Muslim slave, God will spare from Hell for every limb of the slave a limb [of the liberator]. Accordingly, the mentioned slave is equal to free people and enjoys all the rights of the free. No one has any right of ownership over her.

And also in the presence of witnesses, Shaykh Muḥammad Ādam freed the female slave Ḥalīma. She is black and has a son, Sālīm, in accordance with the Sharī ‘a for the sake of the generous Allāh and following the Prophet (PBUH) who said that any man who frees a Muslim slave, God will spare from Hell for every limb of the slave a limb [of the liberator]. Accordingly, the mentioned slave is equal to free people and enjoys all the rights of the free. No one has any right of ownership over her. And Shaykh Muḥammad Ādam freed the slave Amān al-Ḥabashī in accordance with the Sharī ‘a for the sake of the generous Allāh and the Prophet, PBUH, who said that any man who frees a Muslim slave, Allāh will spare from Hell for every limb of the slave a limb [of the liberator]. Accordingly the mentioned slave is equal to free people and enjoys all the rights of the free. No one has any right of ownership over him.

We issued this in the presence of witnesses.

(3 witnesses signed [Mūsā Muḥammad ‘Uthmān Mentāy from Massawa, Sulaymān ibn ‘Ajmī ‘Adūlāy from Massawa, and Shaykh ‘Abdū son of the late shaykh ‘Alī al-Faqīh al- ‘Antablī from Massawa (and seals), and the manumitter, Muḥammad Ādam) (Fig. 3).

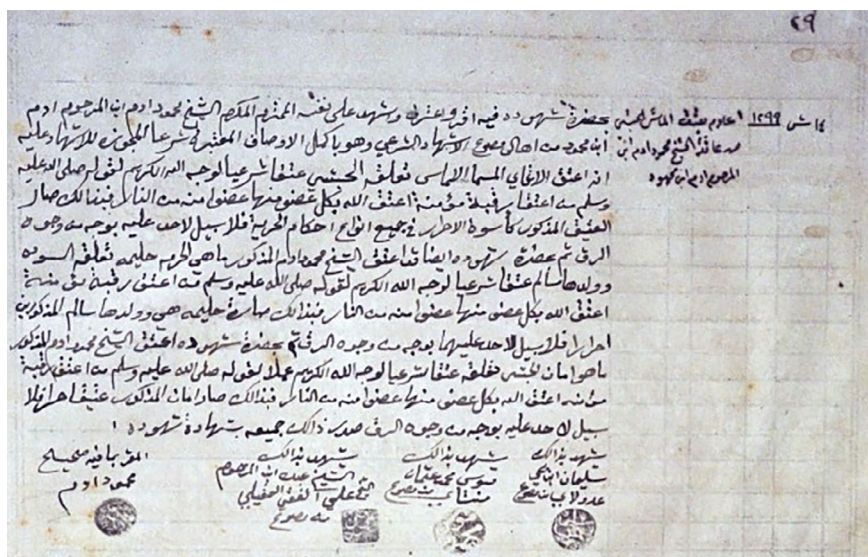


Fig. 3 Sample III. Source [MICR 8/29a (14 Sha 'bān 1299 / 30 June 1882)]

Sample IV

This is a legal document issued by the court of the port of Massawa. Faraj from the land of Kufit came with a document from the governorate indicating his freedom and giving him the rights and the duties of free men, and no one holds a right of ownership over him. In accordance with this document, we issue him a manumission certificate attesting his freedom. Hence, the pre-mentioned Faraj is now a free man based on the reason mentioned above, in the presence of the following people. Witnesses: Muhammad Adam Nā'ib Ahmad, 'Abd al-Karīm 'Abd al-Rahīm Nā'ib Ahmad, Nā'ib Idrīs Hasan, Nā'ib Idrīs? (Fig. 4).

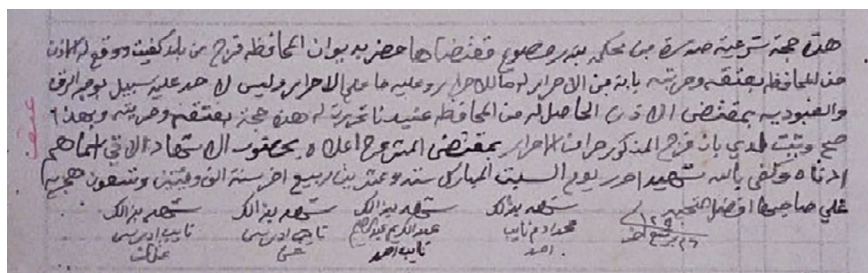


Fig. 4 Sample IV. Source: [MICR 14/14c (26 Rabī' II 1290 / 22 June 1873)]

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Missionary Sources and African History: the Case of Two Swedish Lutheran Missions



Lars Folke Berge

Abstract Encouraged by the scholarly generosity and broad learning of Irma Taddia, including her interest in African religious modern history, this article explores contrary tendencies in the missionary sources of the two major Swedish Lutheran missions operating in Africa from around the 1890s to the 1930s: the Swedish Evangelical Mission (SEM) in Eritrea–Ethiopia beginning in 1865 and the Church of Sweden Mission (CSM), from the early 1870s in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. The attempt is to shed light on the distinctiveness, the scope and the categorisation of different materials and how social and political tendencies are seen in the archival sources. Originating from the Swedish nineteenth century popular mobilisation from below, the SEM was a vehicle for egalitarian ideals and the modernisation of society, manifest in its educational endeavours in Eritrea–Ethiopia, but also in a criticism of local, traditional Ethiopian society. The CSM, on the other hand, representing a romanticist-inspired, nationalist *folk-church* movement, had rather been formed against the forces of modernity. In KwaZulu-Natal, the missionaries encouraged Zulu history, culture, ethnic and national unity in the face of an aggressive colonialism and capitalism. The two missions shared the Swedish Lutheran background, but the divergent tendencies of the sources indicate that social and political background overruled both national and confessional belonging as well as the different contexts of their mission fields, respectively.

Keywords Swedish missions · Africa · Egalitarian ideals · Modernity · Mission archives

Introduction

For a large part of the twentieth century, many historians on Africa regarded the use of missionary sources as a reserve for mission or church historians. There were of course notable exceptions but much of the research produced by the latter was

L. F. Berge (✉)
Dalarna University, Falun, Sweden
e-mail: labe@du.se

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dismissed as descriptive and actor-centred or preoccupied with institutional histories of individual churches and missions. Despite an abundance of mission historical scholarship, the critics said, most of it failed to situate religion in the broad political, social, and economic context. Remarkably little attention was paid even to African converts and, of course, even less to those beyond the mission station. Mission historians, on the other hand, complained that “secular” historians were blind to the role of religion or ideology or failed to dig deeper into the cultural or intercultural resources of missionary archives. Beyond the obvious religious bias and dominance of white missionary voices, they argued, the archives comprised of a wealth of written narratives, unique in otherwise illiterate societies, revealing that the agents of conversion overwhelmingly were locals, not missionaries, and that women were omnipresent both as agents and converts. At the heart of the matter, as Richard Elphick reminds us, was the fact that missionaries, as religious people, were not solely religious but also men and women, adults or children, workers, or peasants. As individuals or as a group they acted and were acted upon, in many ways appropriate to their multiple identities. Their religious sensibilities, he says, sometimes reinforced, sometimes undermined and sometimes was entirely irrelevant to their activities as members of other groups (Elphick, 1995, 1997). Still, for a long time African history was written without much attention to mission history and mission history without really considering the broader historical framework. An influential breakthrough for the use of missionary sources *outside* the world of both historians and mission historians was therefore Jean and John Comaroff’s *Of Revelation and Revolution* (Comaroff & Comaroff, 1991). Drawing on the massive archives of the London Missionary Society on its work among the Tswana, with anthropological analytical tools, they successfully combined archival resources with analyses of ritual and performance.¹ While separate compartments between mainline and mission historians still exist (Cabrita & Erlank, 2018), the dividing line is gradually fading away and today the more ambitious scholars search for the appropriate sources—indifferent of the nature of archives.

The present chapter deals with sources of the two major Swedish Lutheran missionary societies at work in Africa: the state Church of Sweden Mission (CSM) in KwaZulu-Natal, Southern Africa, and the low-church Swedish Evangelical Mission (SEM) in Eritrea and Ethiopia, covering fairly the same period—from the 1890s to the 1930s. Naturally, different objectives result in different sources. On KwaZulu-Natal, a focus on the local, social, “grass-root” history, led me to archives in Sweden, South Africa and elsewhere. In the Eritrea–Ethiopia case, with a study on how the SEM mission enterprise was reflected in Sweden, published sources were most important. My research interest, and consequent search for sources, can largely be characterised as *global history*, centred around the concept of the *spatial turn*, a trend that benefited from the theoretical insights of Mattias Middel and Katja Naumann. In my case, this

¹ Norman Etherington (2005: 4) writes: “[while] the Comaroffs cannot be accused of resuscitating missionary heroes, they have breathed new life into the almost lifeless corpse of the missionary-as-imperialist.”.

evolves around questions of how disparate regions have been subject to several cross-cultural and long-distance influences—the proliferation of knowledge, expertise, and ideas between regions and areas.² As part of such global entanglements, Swedish missionaries and their counterparts in Africa can be said to have functioned as “portals of globalisation”, serving as entrance points for cultural transfer and global connectedness (Berge, 2020). Studies particularly characterising and comparing the nature of different missionary sources and archives have, to my knowledge, never been done before in the Swedish academic context.³ Coming from a small country in northern Europe without a direct colonial past, Swedish missionaries were usually confined to establish their mission fields in territories held by various colonial powers, such as in French and Belgian Congo, where they had to relate to an at times favoured Roman Catholic Church. In British-dominated parts of Southern Africa, they competed with a whole range of other Protestant missionaries who generally had a double mandate to also cater for the white settler population. Relations with colonial powers and African authorities varied from support and collaboration to criticism and, occasionally, open conflict.⁴

By exemplifying with the two Swedish Lutheran missions, questions can be asked about the distinctiveness of mission sources in relation to other historical sources. What is the scope of missionary archival materials and how can they be categorised? What characterises the missionary journals and what is their value as historical evidence? Associated with this is the difficult, and not so much elaborated question if and to what extent social and political developments in Africa in any way bounced back on the West, in this case the Swedish public opinion. Then, in what way can ideological backgrounds and biases of the missionaries, the producers of the sources, be seen in the source materials? Finally, while the missionary sources undeniably are both western-centric and religiously biased, are there any ways of getting around this partiality to the contribution of African history?

Background

The producers of sources of both societies were influenced by the Swedish background where Lutheranism had been an ideological tool in the hands of Swedish rulers ever since the early sixteenth century reformation. Based on the Lutheran confessional writings, this involved an active concern for education, and, after the 1686 ecclesiastical law, the clergy controlled the reading abilities of all parishioners. Eventually, this led to a remarkable rate in literacy. As put by Hobsbawm (1989: 23), “[a] poor and overwhelmingly rural country like Sweden, with no more than 10

² The *spatial turn* interprets space not as a container but as a constructed set of plural and competing relations between entities (Middell and Naumann 2010: 152, 158).

³ For an overview of mostly British Protestant materials see Bickers and Seaton (1996).

⁴ A comprehensive account of Swedish mission societies is Lundström et al. (2021).

per cent illiteracy in 1850 would be hard to imagine elsewhere than in the Protestant zone of the world.”

Both literacy and Bible reading were important when Sweden in the nineteenth century became religiously pluralistic. Anglo-Saxon influences spurred an early evangelical revival and a broad mobilisation for foreign missions. In 1856, the SEM was founded as a Lutheran, distinctly low-church popular movement within the state church. Other types of Protestant denominations, inspired by the evangelical revival in the U.S. later emerged. With a more indigenous background and as a break-away from the SEM, the Mission Covenant Church was founded in 1878. Provoked by the growing enthusiasm for foreign missions, but very different in aim and character, the state church too established its own mission agency, the CSM. Religious changes during the nineteenth century were accompanied by social changes resulted by the 1850s first industrial breakthrough and the second phase in the 1890s. With mobilisation from below, the literate citizen became politically mobilised in a wide range of social movements. Emerging from the old world was the modern welfare state. A mostly rural society was gradually transformed into a monetary economy and an increasingly industrialised, urbanised, and globally connected country. In this way, popularly broad-based mission societies from a small, still rather poor country in the periphery of Europe came to involve themselves in different parts of the world such as the Horn of Africa and Southern Africa.

When the SEM in 1865 decided to send missionaries to the Red Sea coast—seen as a gateway to the interior (Dirar, 2003: 394)—the aim was not to interfere with Orthodox Ethiopia but to reach the non-Christian Oromo beyond the highlands in the south. For various reasons, they had to remain on the coast and it was only later they gradually expanded further south: first to the highlands, to what in 1890 became Italian Eritrea, then, in 1904, to Addis Ababa the capital of independent Ethiopia, to, eventually, reach the Oromo, by then conquered by Ethiopia. The SEM had been among the earliest entrants in the Horn and played a dominant role in the educational sector in Eritrea until expelled in 1932. In Ethiopia, the SEM presence in Addis Ababa proved most strategic when, encouraged by the emperor, the SEM was invited to participate in the modernisation process, such as teaching literacy, organising schools and health work, crucial in maintaining the sovereignty of one of the last independent countries in Africa.

The CSM followed another missionary highway: to southern Africa where missionaries hoped a mass conversion of the formerly so powerful Zulu kingdom would lead other peoples to follow suit. While Zululand for many years remained closed, most societies stayed in the British colony of Natal, which eventually became one of the most heavily evangelised regions in the world (Etherington, 1978). Whaling brought Norwegians to this part of the world and in 1844 the first missionary of the Norwegian Missionary Society set foot on the Natal coast. When later proven useful to the Zulu king, he was invited to establish a string of mission stations throughout the country and asked both Saxonian and Swedish Lutherans for assistance. As latecomers in 1876, the CSM had to settle on the border to Zululand with the aim of reaching further into the kingdom. The 1879 British conquering of Zululand was cherished by most Norwegians who, with hitherto little success, now hoped

individualism and modernisation would break down resistance against Christianity. In the totally opposite direction, the CSM ideology, inspired by romanticism and aiming at the conversion of entire peoples, was instead intent on providing Christianity as a kind of new “cement” that would restore and strengthen Zulu culture against the forces of colonialism and capitalism. Hence, Sweden, Eritrea–Ethiopia, and southern Africa were all three drawn into a late nineteenth century economic, political and cultural but also religious process of globalisation.

Vernacular Languages and Local Context

Missionary sources are, like other narratives from geographically distant settings, likely to generate fuller accounts than correspondence in familiar environments. They are, however, distinguished by an in-depth knowledge of vernacular languages. The Protestant emphasis on Bible reading in the vernacular as the only way to faith and salvation, ensured a thorough learning of local languages. All over the world missionaries were busy codifying hitherto non literate languages. The missionaries took this seriously. Newly arrived male missionaries to South Africa had to spend their first year in a remote part of Zululand living with a Zulu-only speaking family, essential for a proper introduction to both language and culture but also to avoid fraternisation with white settler society. For a young, bachelor missionary, alienated from family, culture and language back home, the CSM catalogue of aspirant “missionary brides” was useful when applying for company to be sent from Sweden.⁵ Language was indeed inherent in the vocation. When the Natal government in 1904 required English as the medium of instruction to receive the grant-in-aid for mission schools, there was great consternation among the women schoolteachers. The new directive indicated how closely vocation was attached to language. “By no means” Beda Wennerquist said, “have I left my fatherland and all my dear ones to instruct the Zulu children in the reading and writing of English”.⁶ In Eritrea, where the SEM schools taught in Tigré, Tigrinya, Bilèn, or Kunama, problems arose when the Italian government in 1909 began to insist on the teaching in the Italian language, history, and culture (Miran, 2002). Accusations of being “anti-Italian”, raising questions about the loyalty of the SEM missionaries to Fascist Italy, was one of the reasons why the “Missione Svedese” eventually was expelled in 1932 (Berge, 2017: 100). Vernacular language was also at stake in the south of Ethiopia among the mostly non-Christian Oromo conquered by Ethiopia in the late nineteenth century. Here, the SEM was evangelising with the blessing of the central government in Addis Ababa

⁵ Church of Sweden Mission Journal (hereafter CSM Journal), Sandström (1905), Warde Ijus! *Svenska kyrkans missions tidning*, 30 (23), 363–365; Sandström (1906), Pröfwotider- hälsotider. *Svenska kyrkans missions tidning*, 31 (4), 54–57. Church of Sweden Mission Archives (hereafter CSMA), Mission Director’s Correspondence, South Africa, 1905–1906, Josef Sandström to Gudmar Hogner, 13 December 1905.

⁶ CSMA, Mission Director’s Correspondence, South Africa, 1903–1904, E I c: 3, Beda Wennerquist to Gudmar Hogner, 25 March 1903.

which aimed at the cultural and religious incorporation of these parts into Ethiopia.⁷ While Orthodox priests, who used Geez in church and otherwise preferred their own Amharic, were seen as instruments of Amara culture and Shoan domination, the SEM, with its heavy emphasis on the vernacular, contributed to the strengthening of the subjected Oromo identity (Arén, 1978: 398).⁸

Unlike the occasional visit by explorers, travellers, etc., the missionaries had lived long in their regions, they knew the people among whom they worked and could convey otherwise non-existent narratives. In regions where few were literate, such as among the Zulu or the Oromo, their accounts provide unique voices of people otherwise not heard. This includes both followers of the mission as well as bystanders and antagonists. One example is the grievances voiced by the KwaZulu-Natal grass-root communities during the 1906 Bambatha rebellion.⁹ Most narratives and analyses have been based on British colonial archival materials, derived from district commissioners, magistrates, etc. (who often received intelligence from paid informants who knew what the magistrate wanted to hear). The missionaries had very different sources. In 1906 CSM missionaries lived in four of the five war zones and, unlike the British administrators, they spoke Zulu fluently and understood the context. When all whites had fled, they were the only to remain and write about the fighting, especially the atrocities carried out by the white militia. They knew the people, the chiefs, and the headmen. Through their many black co-workers, the evangelists, they had an intelligence network which reached wide and far. Thanks to the missionary sources and the social realities they convey, it is possible to distinguish different reasons why the uprising broke out. The north of Natal—where all farmlands had been taken by whites and the uprising was a farm labourers' resistance against proletarianisation—can be contrasted with the south and the African reserves: there, unrest more related to declining power and influence of chiefs and headmen. Not least did the missionaries know the many wives and daughters who in the previous years had converted to Christianity. The week before violence broke out in the south, not less than 100 women—and only one elderly man—were baptised by the Swedish missionary at the *Iswidi* mission station. At the same time, husbands, fathers, brothers, and sons were sharpening their knives up in the hills, getting ready to kill and throw out all whites, including missionaries, from the land of their ancestors (Berge, 2000, 2013). Perspectives like these are uniquely derived from missionary sources. New insights among historians of Africa about the value of such sources have more recently brought about an historiographical shift from attention to agency to that of popular reception of Christianity.¹⁰

⁷ SEM Mission journal, hereafter (SEM Journal), Söderström (1923), Glädjebud från Galla. *Missions-Tidning*, 90 (19A), 269–70.

⁸ SEM Journal, Pålman (1922), Vi hava övertunnit! *Missions-Tidning*, 89 (17a), 230–231.

⁹ The Bambatha rebellion, or the Poll tax rebellion in KwaZulu-Natal, was the last armed attempt by Zulu speaking people to overthrow British domination and reestablish the 1879 defeated Zulu kingdom.

¹⁰ Some examples are Urban-Mead (2015), Kuflu (2018) and Rosnes (2019).

The Archival Sources

Both societies have their official archives in Uppsala, Sweden. The CSM archives are meticulously organised, the result of the CSM privileged position as a function of the state.¹¹ Derived from a non-governmental organisation, the SEM archives are not similarly complete.¹² While the minutes from the missionaries' conferences in Eritrea have been preserved since 1875, very little remains of missionary correspondence, diaries, or annual reports.¹³ One can only speculate about such an absence but a general impression is that much of what the missionaries wrote home went in full to be published in the SEM journal. The SEM sources must be supplemented by other collections, such as those at the Swedish National Archives and various private archives. As evident in Gustav Arén's history of the SEM in Eritrea and Ethiopia, it was only with a variety of other sources that he could complete his massive study (Arén, 1978: 457–8; Arén, 1999: 539–40; Hedenskog, 1994: 13–18).¹⁴

The CSM source materials cover a wide range of documents. On the Swedish side, they include the activities of the Home Board, chaired by the Archbishop of Sweden, the minutes with the steering committee resolutions, correspondence with the home organisation and outgoing instructions to the missionaries in the field. While much of the outbound communication at a first glance appears to have been lost, duplicates of outgoing mail make it possible to trace both ends of a conversation. Before dispatched, ink-written letters were first coated by a special paste, then pressed onto leaf-thin papers and finally bound into annual copybooks. The duplicated letters, now backward imprinted, can with difficulties be deciphered with the help of a pocket mirror. Still, a great many of them, with completely faded writing, appear to have been lost to posterity. It was an unexpected breakthrough when I, by random, learned from a philatelist friend how ultraviolet light can reveal faded postmarks. Back in the archives with the purchased lamp, the blue light almost miraculously revealed the hitherto hidden messages.

Of source materials produced by the missionaries and African co-workers, one category is made up of the minutes from missionary conferences, annual opportunities to exchange experiences, discuss practices, and draw up strategies. The meetings could last for several days and were important in many ways. Especially to the SEM, it was a social highlight for whole families to attend with excursions, picnicks, prayer meetings, and Swedish-style dinners. Practical matters were discussed as well as more theological topics. Among the CSM ordained clergy, the minutes from several

¹¹ The CSMA 385 shelf meters include the field archives from South Africa and South India.

¹² The Eritrea–Ethiopia share cannot be separated from the total 500 shelf meters SEM collections, hosted by the Regional Archives for Uppsala County, since the evangelizing SEM never differed between souls in Sweden and Ethiopia-Eritrea. Interview with archivist, Bosse Temnéus, 1 July 2021.

¹³ For a remarkably limited use of SEM archival sources see Kuflu (2018).

¹⁴ From the SEM Oromo region, merely accounts and only beginning in 1927 are preserved. From Addis Ababa, where work was taken up in 1904, only minutes and only from 1925 are preserved and annual reports from 1935.

mission conferences reveal some rather heated theological debates. In the early years of the twentieth century, almost all the CSM missionaries were former students of the Uppsala theologian, Tottie (1856–1913). Inspired by the medieval Christianisation of Sweden and rather than the conversion of individuals, he advocated ethnically and culturally inclusive *folk-churches* in the mission field—which in India would allow for the toleration of the caste system and in South Africa polygyny. In South Africa, the CSM had nevertheless followed the dominant tradition, barring polygynists from baptism but, along with a few other societies, accepted the monogamous wives of polygynous men. Beginning in the 1890s, however, when large numbers of women began to show an interest in Christianity, the Tottie-educated missionaries argued for the abolishment of the polygyny-bar. A *folk-church* without men was not what they had indented. If passed, the CSM would have been unique—not to say heretic—among practically all Protestant missions in South Africa. Eventually, the issue was postponed. The rank-and-file mission sponsors in Sweden, probably abhorred by the thought of baptised Zulu men with harems, were deemed not mature for such a radical change (Berge 2002: 103).

The minutes from the conferences of the CSM evangelists, the missionaries closest and most trusted co-workers, sometimes reveal unique insights into the grey zones between Western Christianity and Zulu religion. The 1906 Bambatha rebellion, where *izinyangas* (diviners or herbalists) with their “war medicines” had played an important role, was run on traditional lines and African Christians were not much involved. The defeat of the rebellion, nevertheless resulted in much heart-searching about divided loyalties, as seen in the number of baptised women seeking cure by the *izinyangas*. A heated debate at 1907 Evangelists’ conference displayed a distrust in the novelties brought by whites. To many, the white physician equalled the indigenous *izinyanga*. The white physician, it was said, knew how to cure Europeans’ physical illnesses while the *izinyanga* was for blacks, most qualified to deal with Africans’ maladies of the soul.

Apart from regular mission station reports, describing developments over time, statistics, etc., the most substantial is the missionary correspondence with home authorities. Providing a wealth of information, it sheds light on local conditions, narrates the lives of individuals, the peoples of the region, relationships between various social or ethnic groups and social institutions and gendered relations as well as interactions with authorities. In Eritrea, the latter were Italian colonial officials and school inspectors, in Ethiopia, local nobility and Ethiopian Orthodox clergy. In British indirect-ruled KwaZulu-Natal, the authorities were local chiefs or headmen on the one hand and British colonial officials on the other.

Not all missionary reports were intended to reach Sweden. The so called “field archives” of a local mission station, often provide a gold mine of African social history. Embedded in the local or regional context, they can comprise of church registers and statistics of baptised, excommunicated or re-admitted members with explaining notes. But also remarkably well-informed correspondence between colleagues in South Africa, between them and indigenous co-workers, representatives of other societies, government officials, etc. This is also where vernacular writings by indigenous co-workers and rank-and-file church members may be found.

Not seldom do the “field archives” include materials judged too controversial or too complex to be fully grasped by the mission supporters back home. Some of these archives have been brought to Sweden but several have been lost to posterity. When mission stations were turned over to the indigenous church, such materials were usually not highly valued, especially if much was in Swedish. One odd case was related to me by archivists at Pietermaritzburg. There, the archives from one of the major CSM Natal mission stations had been entrusted an official at the provincial library, who, for uncertain reasons, had harboured them in his private garage. When he died, his heirs assumedly sold the lot to a private collector in the U.S.

Quite unique are the private collections, often donated by relatives after the author’s demise. An impressive collection at the Uppsala University Library, is that of theologian Adolf Kolmodin (1855–1928), one of the leading figures of the SEM, comprising of his private correspondence with Swedes, Eritreans, and Ethiopians. One of the finest examples is the private correspondence between the CSM missionary, Baroness Hedvig Posse (1861–1927) and her sister Anna corresponding on an almost weekly basis between 1887 and 1912. Her narratives reach from everyday situations at the mission station, to extensive travels in Zululand in search for old war songs and pre-colonial history, as well as reports from siege, war and rebellion during the South African War and the Bambatha Rebellion (Berge, 2000; Sarja, 2003). Another fascinating case is the diaries by one of the CSM missionaries to South Africa. Uncatalogued in the CSM archives and at the time stacked in a Chiquita banana cardboard box, were a great number of small, pocket-size, leather-bound calendars with gold edged pages, crammed with miniscule handwriting. Recorded from the first arrival in South Africa to the very last calendar several decades later, the diaries told of daily work, private sorrows and joys, loss of children departed for schooling in Sweden, the death of colleagues and friends, etc. The honesty and intimacy of the narratives were moving. The last calendar in the box was only half-written and the author’s increasingly severe heart problems had been a recurring theme. The last written page abruptly ended in the middle of a sentence: “into Your hands I command my soul...” followed by the line drawn to the bottom of the page by the pencil in a lifeless hand. Many historians have experienced the remarkable sense of “then” becoming “now”. I took the rest of the day off, feeling that I somehow had to honour a friend, far away in time but whom I had come very close.

Published Sources: The Mission Journals

The mission venture was entirely dependent on the continuous subsistence from the mission supporters back home, making the mission journal the indispensable lifeline. A weakened financial support could imply great difficulties, even the closing down of a mission station. Economic subjects seem to be more prevalent in the SEM sources than in those of the state CSM. Both journals, however, had recurring and extensive

sections of voluntary donations and contributions, carefully listing the names of individual givers, no matter how small amounts contributed.

The mission journal was the main channel of information and the missionaries were more or less obliged to regularly write home about their achievements. Both progress and decline could serve as motivation for continued or increased support. The missionaries' contributions usually featured updates on recent developments, the daily work at schools or in hospitals, challenges, troubles, and sorrows as well as climate, health, and travels. People in the nearness of missionaries are often narrated with first names which suggest that they were known to the readers. Letters were often written in a private and personal tone and, even if seemingly unedited, one may expect a certain degree of self-censorship involved. Both missionaries and editors were assumedly inclined to convey a distinct narrative which at times could be simplified, beautified, or exotified. By and large, both the SEM and the CSM journals were characterised by a popular form and layout that made them easily accessible to the vast majority of readers.

A little more than 100 years ago, mission periodicals were among the absolute bestsellers of Swedish popular literature. From 1900 onwards, the SEM journal with its 25,000 copies per issue, was one of the larger periodicals in Sweden. A major national newspaper, *Dagens Nyheter*, also had a circulation of 25,000 copies although its distribution was daily while that of the journal was fortnightly (Lenhammar, 1981).¹⁵ Nevertheless, missionary journals, like pamphlets, and other religious literature, were not only read by the individual subscriber but usually redistributed and recycled over and over again, read privately or aloud at public meetings. In the decades around the turn of the century, this could have implied a readership of possibly 100,000 (Rubenson, 1985: 131; Ulvros, 1996: 23). The broad social spectrum of people involved on both sides in this long-distance and over time continuous conversation is, furthermore, striking. The popular dimension has articulately been described by Swedish novelist Anders Ehnmark:

Africa, as America, is close. The upper class in Sweden has [traditionally] turned itself towards the European great powers, [such as] Germany, France or England, but the people has turned to America, due to the emigrants, and to Africa, due to the missionaries. There has always been an aunt Eleonora in America and a cousin Agnes working for the mission in Congo. The upper class [has been] turned to the South [and] the people to the West, but also to the South, although with their eyes set beyond our continent. That is the old pattern (Sellström, 1999: 42).

Through the tens of thousands of mission supporters, a kind of direct connection was established with contemporary major global events. And emotionally and interest-wise, their horizons widened. People in distant lands were in spite of the geographical distance mentioned and spoken about as fellow human beings (Holmberg, 1988). The mission venture bridged grass-root supporters in Sweden and rank-and file church members in Africa, between continents and across generations. The

¹⁵ The circulation of the SEM journal was not unique among mission periodicals, in 1900 also the *Swedish Covenant Church Journal* counted 25,000 copies. See Tollin (1967: 22) and Odén (2012: 11, 20).

educational role of the mission journals cannot be overstated at a time when the public opinion merely had begun to take an interest in the outside world. As a country in the north, without any colonial heritage, Swedish media paid a very limited attention to foreign affairs, at least up until the interwar years (Lundström et al, 2001). The mission supporters, however, received not only more but also a more varied information. Missionaries' narratives reached supporters in Sweden who in their turn came to influence Swedish public opinion long before media coverage began to take an interest in international conflicts. Events in Africa were reflected in and bounced back to Sweden. The probably first ever case of Swedish public opinion mobilised for foreign aid originated from SEM missionaries' alarming reports about the 1889–92 devastating famine in northern Ethiopia. Sweden was not a rich country but at the end of 1891, mission supporters had collected famine relief to the substantial sum of almost half the annual budget for the entire SEM mission field. This, as put by Arén (1978: 322), may well “have been the first substantial Swedish contribution towards international emergency aid. It was an important step towards a new attitude of fellowship and solidarity with people of other creeds and races”. Another case is the 1899–1902 South African War, or the second Anglo-Boer War. Like much of continental Europe, the Swedish public opinion sided with the small Boer republics against the British superpower (Rosenblad, 1992). CSM missionaries' reports about Boer cruelties against the black population, however, influenced major Swedish newspapers and actually contributed to turning the public opinion to a more pro-British stance (Furberg, 1962). A third case is the media debate caused by the 1906 Bambatha rebellion. While conservative papers, such as the *Stockholms Dagblad*, usually defended the white troops and accused the irresponsible liberal opinion in Britain for its outbreak, the liberal *Dagens Nyheter* pointed at the few whites killed in contrast to the great number of Africans slaughtered under “white barbarism”. When the leading CSM missionary unilaterally put the blame on the African side in the latter paper, this caused resentment and upset feelings among the important mission supporters (Berge, 2000: 346–52). A fourth case, is the rather overlooked missionary-inspired Swedish public opinion and massive popular mobilisation, reaching from the political left to the right, in support of Ethiopia before and during the 1935–36 Italo-Ethiopian war. The long-term contacts between the two countries and the strong involvement by the mission-oriented segments of the Swedish population were crucial. Summarising this unexpected solidarity with a country in “faraway Africa”, Sven Rubenson (1985: 132) says: “[m]y impression is that a feeling of affinity with and in most cases a sympathy for the Ethiopians had developed to an extent which did not exist with regard to any other African or Asian people”. Such examples of global connectedness and cultural transfer, need more research but may demonstrate that it is the interaction *between* societies, instead of internal evolution, that emerges as the most important force when identifying development and modernity (Middell & Naumann, 2010: 158).

The dual purpose of the missionaries' narratives, to account to the home authorities and encourage the mission supporters, raises questions about their value as historical evidence. In the Norwegian context, scholars have distinguished between backstage publications, intended for internal use, and front stage publication, meant

for the wider mission-interested public, such as the mission journal. Similarly, the distinction between the missionaries' more private letters and the printed accounts has been analysed. Interestingly, the differences appear not to have been very significant. One reason for this, as suggested by Karina Haestad Skeie, was the Christian-ideological framework that dominated the missionary narratives, leading to each account having to be read towards its historical context (Roaldset, 2020: 19). In her recent study on Norwegian missionaries in KwaZulu-Natal, Hege Roaldset (2020) finds little evidence of missionaries' reports subduing their persona or their letters significantly having been edited before publication and few signs of a distinction between backstage and frontstage publications.

In the Swedish context, the more egalitarian SEM seem to have carried fewer conflicts between what the missionaries wrote and what eventually was published. In line with the pietistic tradition, the SEM was generally not very interested in politics. "We don't understand politics and believe it brings more evil than good" as expressed by one missionary of this tradition (Berge, 2017: 79). Dissenting voices did exist but as noted by Rubenson (1985: 132), they were few and seldom reached the public. It was not so within the more hierarchical CSM. From its beginning, the CSM was characterised by several conflicts. In the early years of the twentieth century and inspired of the social Darwinist thinking of the day, the editor of the CSM journal favoured the South India field in comparison with that of the Zulu. While the Tamil people represented an old, "advanced" culture, mission director Gudmar Hogner said, the Zulu were "[...] descendants of an absolutely uncivilised people" (*ibidem*). In the discussion about the "maturity" of the converts the Zulu were accordingly not held in high esteem by him. Judged by evolutionary standards, he said, they were very far behind the Tamil Indians.¹⁶ In the aftermath of the 1906 rebellion, another mission director was determined to keep contemporary political struggles out of it. Several missionaries did not believe the African side solely responsible for the violence. One of them was Reinhold Kempe, the leading Zululand missionary, who not only had his article about the uprising censored but who also had received reprimands for it. Severely hurt, he would never become, he said, such a disengaged missionary that anything not immediately involving mission would become alien to him. Denouncing the Home Board's constantly nervous, middle-of-the-road position, he continued, "This fear for shadows makes me desperate and bitter" (Berge, 2000: 348). Kempe's controversy with the authorities in Uppsala continued in June 1907 when he asked the Home Board to not continually accuse him of being, "a rabid radical" only because he, in certain issues, dared to have his own opinion and that he dared to voice these opinions (*ibidem*).

¹⁶ CSMA, Mission Director's outgoing correspondence, Hogner, 1900–1901, B II: 2, Gudmar Hogner to Fredrik Ljungquist, 23 January 1901.

Different Perspectives: Modernisers and Folklorists

While both Lutheran missions originated from the popular mobilisation for foreign missions during the nineteenth century, they had different social origins and represented different social layers of Swedish late nineteenth or early twentieth century society which in turn coloured their narratives.

The low-church SEM missionaries, mainly from central and northern Sweden, were mostly lay people, schoolteachers, evangelists, bakers, carpenters, etc., representative of the nineteenth century emerging classes. A four-year training programme at the Johannelund Theological Training Institute in Stockholm, preceded the sending to the mission field (Tafvelin & Lundmark, 1974). What characterises the SEM narratives and sources is a decidedly modernising outlook. The missionaries were evangelists but also social reformers who had come to Eritrea–Ethiopia to spread education, healthcare and Western civilisation. The missionaries were busy founding schools, including the education of girls, organising the printing of literature in several languages, initiating work among freed slaves and refugees, and introducing Western healthcare. They became pioneers of adult education, and their schools became the first revolutionary examples of adult education also for women. The purpose was to evangelise but, since literacy was a requirement for membership in the Evangelical church, the organisation of schools runs as a red thread throughout the whole SEM modernising venture.

The SEM curriculum was, nevertheless, not restricted to literacy. Subjects taught at the SEM School in Addis Ababa included Amharic, English, History, Geography, Natural Science, Hygiene, and Singing (Arén, 1999: 145). Another dominant feature is the encouraging of practical skills. Elementary education was combined with vocational training such as carpentry, rope making, brick making and gardening for boys and for girls: training in domestic skills such as in needlework and traditional crafts like basket work and spinning (Arén, 1978: 218). While girls were trained to make “good Christian housewives”, from its very beginning, the SEM regarded education for girls just as important as that for boys with egalitarian principles assumedly derived from the popular movements in Sweden. As the evangelical revivals and the popular mobilisation from below had become vehicles for the modernisation and democratisation of Sweden, the missionaries tried to do the same in Eritrea–Ethiopia. The women who had attended the SEM schools for girls, Arén (1978: 252) writes, had “not merely widened their horizon: it had given them a new dignity. By their very appearance they foreshadowed the coming of a new type of Ethiopian woman, educated, well-mannered, on a par with men”. Already in the early years in Massawa, outside observers were astonished to see how Ethiopian married women and men, Swedish missionaries and Ethiopians socialised. “As a matter of principle nobody enjoyed special privileges. All were equals, whatever the outward difference” (Arén, 1978: 251). The Swedish egalitarian principles were also at stake among the Oromo. From the south, a SEM missionary condemned the strict social distinction between rich and poor and how it was impossible for an Ethiopian nobleman to sit in the same room as the poorer Oromo. Nevertheless, to the SEM missionaries, equality was an

indefeasible principle that necessarily had to be nurtured through all their missionary work.¹⁷ Such statements were apparently well-received by those who hoped education would bring revolutionary changes. The Oromo have begun to realise that knowledge is superior to ignorance, wrote Onésimos Näsib (c. 1856–1931), the SEM pastor and celebrated translator of the Bible into Oromo. “The long-standing slavery has suppressed people, there is a lot of hatred and contempt after all these years, those in power cannot help but call us slaves and we cannot stand it. [...] all forces have been in motion since the end of the War”.¹⁸

In 1936, when Ethiopia had been conquered by Italy and appeared lost to the SEM, Jonas Iwarson, the leading missionary, summarised the influence of Evangelical Christianity not least in cultural matters. Through the mission schools and its emphasis on literacy, he said, a general education also in secular subjects had been spread in vast areas, resulting in improved craftsmanship and social and economic enhancements.¹⁹ Literacy was, however, sometimes emphasised to the extent that religion was overshadowed. Discussing the SEM educational impact in Ethiopia in 1935, Axel Jonsson, in charge of the SEM in Addis Ababa, the first Western school in the capital, sensed that an unanswered question waited to be addressed: “but what is the spiritual result of your schoolwork?” The real result, he said, answering his own question, will not be clear until Doomsday. “We wish and pray that the Spirit of the Lord will do its transformative work in everyone’s heart.”²⁰

The SEM presence in Eritrea–Ethiopia and the call for modernisation was, however, seen against a backdrop of a country that, albeit revered as ancient and Christian, was described as fossilised in prehistoric, unintelligible traditions. What Aasulv Lande has remarked about Arén’s negative portrayal of the Orthodox Church, holds true for much of the SEM sources (Lande, 1998: 193). Narratives of superstitious Orthodox clergy but also malicious Roman Catholic priests were frequently contrasted with the pious, orderly, and hardworking Protestants. A report from the Orthodox Easter Celebration by the SEM missionary–physician Erik Söderström is illustrative when he talks of the “so-called service” and the following “revelry, which lasts all the rest of the night and a large part of the following day and constitutes the Abyssinians’ Easter celebration!”²¹ The SEM was on the side of modernity and it is not difficult to see parallels to how the Roman Catholic Church and the Lutheran reformation was pictured in contemporary Sweden: “[h]ow little rewarding for the participants must this godly celebration not be! Everything, both the song and the reading take place in a language, not even understood by most of the priests—even

¹⁷ SEM Journal, Söderström (1925), Återblick på verksamheten i Nakamte. *Missions-Tidning*, 92 (13–14), 196–199.

¹⁸ SEM Journal, Onesimus (1920), Budskap från Galla. *Missions-Tidning*, 87 (23a), 250–251 (translation by the author).

¹⁹ SEM Journal, Iwarson (1936), Vårt sjuttioåriga missionsarbets betydelse för Etiopiens folk. *Missions-Tidning*, 103 (11), 145–146 (translation by the author). See also Arén (1999: 145).

²⁰ SEM Journal, Jonsson (1935), Skolarbetet i Addis Abeba. *Missions-Tidning*, 102 (49), 579–580 (translation by the author).

²¹ SEM Journal, Söderström (1921), En abessinsk påskgudstjänst i Adis Abeba. *Missions-Tidning*, 88 (3a), 27–29.

less by the people. Melancholy instead of edification is what the undersigned brought from that church visit.”²² The SEM director Nils Dahlberg attended the celebration of the Baptism of Jesus, which introduced the Orthodox new year. Dahlberg ironises over the holy “tabot”, representing the Ark of the Covenant. No one was allowed to see it, he said, and there were wild rumours of what it contained, some believed it was a living being and sincerely venerated and dreaded it. “During the night there is a big party, several drink too much of the not so innocent drinks—a pathetic and unworthy beginning of a church feast. Everyone must kiss the cross that the priests carry around and, what a carrier! Thousands and thousands gather, some are surely hungry for righteousness and peace but what avails them are only dead ceremonies and forms”.²³

In contrast to most other mission societies, the CSM male missionaries were all university educated, mainly at Uppsala University in the 1890s, many had a teaching degree, and all were ordained in the Church of Sweden. Among the women missionaries, all bachelors and so-called mission workers, most were teachers, others were nurses or deaconesses. The idea of recruiting lay, male specialists, such as physicians and agronomist, for mission work in South Africa had been discussed but was eventually refuted on the grounds that they, without the distinction that came with ordination, may have been tempted to too much identify with white society. With their academic background and their ideologically motivated assumptions about the Zulu culture, the CSM missionaries were skilled and nuanced observers. What distinguishes several of their narratives is not only the well-informed character but also the exceptionally appreciative portrayals of the Zulu. As recognised by Åke Holmberg, the wider references and varied portrayals of Africans are remarkably different from the clichés generally presented by other whites. He exemplifies with a widely spread book by CSM missionaries Axel Liljestrang and Knut Hallendorff. Instead of depicting Africans as lazy and indolent, they ascribe contemporary South African achievements, such as the building of harbours, railroads, towns, and the working of mines, to the sweat and toil of the indigenous people. In a similar manner they sharply refute the common caricature of Africans as “grown up children”. In proving the contrary, they instead refer to intelligent proverbs, talented humour, and a wise legislation (Berge, 2000: 280–1; Holmberg, 1988). Holmberg’s analysis is supported by the CSM archival sources. Faithful to his Uppsala alma mater, the above-mentioned Kempe expressed that the missionary, “should not appear as a social reformer, trying to abolish all anomalies and introduce new regulations in accordance with his own way of thinking.”²⁴ Cautioning against those who were inclined to condemn the heathen customs before they had understood their real origin and meaning, he said:

It is not at all likely or not even plausible that it is in keeping with His plan that these peoples should be totally changed in line with the pattern of European civilisation. To the contrary, it

²² *Ibidem* 28.

²³ SEM Journal, Dahlberg (1925), *Två kyrkfester i Abessinien. Missions-Tidning*, 92 (8a), 120–121.

²⁴ Kempe (1906), Zululand. *Lunds Missionstidning*, 60 (2), 21–22 (translation by the author).

is probable that when they convert, [they] will mould our civilisation and some of our forms of Christianity independently in coherence with their individual talents (Berge, 2000: 196).

The promotion of Zulu language and culture correlated with a zeal for the Zulu past. One of the most prominent translators and recorders of Zulu music and oral history is the above-mentioned Baroness Posse. To her, the music project was as an attempt to preserve traditional Zulu melodies in a period of increasing social change (Sarja, 2003).

Hundred years ago, it is the cultural tolerance and appreciation of Zulu culture and society that really distinguishes the CSM KwaZulu-Natal archival sources. The CSM missionaries were outstanding in their tolerance and accommodation, the mere fact that the above discussion on polygyny took place is next to incomparable in the South African missionary context. There is, however, another side of the coin and that is the politically conservative aspect of their ideology. With the 1906 uprising, most Swedish missionaries voiced and acted in accordance with the Lutheran concept of obedience to the authorities and in line with the conservative heritage in Sweden, aiming at status quo against the forces of social change. This was particularly evident in relation to the Zulu nationalist alternative. Back in 1879, Norwegians and Saxonnians had called for the crushing of the Zulu kingdom. After the 1906 uprising, most Swedish missionaries too welcomed a defeat of Zulu nationalism. This was to have long-lasting negative consequences to the CSM. As late as 1933 one of the leading CSM missionaries, referred to the Bambatha uprising as a crucial watershed among the people in the region and the “deep-rooted, evil and hardly Christian spirit” that had followed and still prevailed particularly among the younger people (Sandström, 1935: 34).

White Missionary Biases—and Beyond?

The missionary narratives are of course, like all source materials, not without biases and tendencies. The problem-stating prerogative belonged to those who produced the sources: the white missionaries. For the period covered, there is an abundance of written material produced by the missionaries compared to the few texts written by Eritreans, Ethiopians, and Zulu. Even with Eritrea–Ethiopia being an ancient literate society, there are remarkably few local voices in the SEM sources. Arén claims the SEM archives include very few letters in Amharic. After 1883, all letters to the SEM Home Board were translated into Swedish (Arén, 1978: 21). For the period up until the early twentieth century, two SEM co-workers stand out as prominent exceptions. Both had been educated at the Theological Seminary Johannelund in Stockholm and both contributed with letters and articles in Swedish. One is Tewolde-Medhin Gebre-Medhin, of Tigray, who during the late 1890s was the most frequently published writer in the journal. The other is the above-mentioned Onésimos, who became somewhat of a celebrity in Sweden. There was probably no mission supporter in Sweden, Robert Odén (2012: 249–50) says, who had not heard of his name likewise

as thousands of Swedes had both seen and heard him. In southern Ethiopia among the Oromo, the SEM missionaries mostly met with illiterate people with only few having left marks in the journal.²⁵ While Swedish women missionaries are less represented in the SEM journal than men, the marginalisation of Eritrean and Ethiopian women authors is next to total. Eritrean–Ethiopian women are occasionally mentioned in the missionary-written articles but rarely speaking for themselves.

What historian Shula Marks (1986: 355) has said about the KwaZulu-Natal colonial archival materials, is applicable also to the missionary sources: “[while] ruling class actions, ideologies and anxieties are abundantly documented, it is extremely difficult to delineate the nature of popular consciousness”. Missionary attitudes and actions are simpler both to trace and describe than perceptions and responses of African co-workers and ordinary church members. With only a few exceptions can the opinions of Africans be obtained through the missionaries’ sources. As such, they may not only be incomplete but also coloured by missionaries’ assumptions. Missionary records are, furthermore, usually limited to the place where the missionary worked which is strikingly contrasted to the very little there is from sites far away from the residences of the white missionaries. Still today, this imbalance in missionary sources tends to perpetuate the incorrectness in the wholesale identification of Christianity in Africa with the Western missionary, obscuring how Christianity south of the Sahara depended on, and was uniquely moulded by African initiatives (Gray, 1990, 2013). In South Africa this was perhaps even further accentuated and, as put by Richard Elphick (1997: 17), “as early as 1911, only 15 per cent of the workers [...] in missionary organisations were white”. Taken seriously, such insights force the researcher to work harder and walk that extra mile. Roaldset is therefore breaking new ground. Acknowledging the one-sidedness of the missionary sources, where the Zulu merely are seen as an object of the missionaries’ evangelisation, her research gains new insights by building on the Russian thinker Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of dialogue. In her study, it is employed to uncover how the two cultures, the Zulu and the Norwegian, mutually influenced each other. By framing the encounter between cultures as a dialogue, the Zulu become seen as acting subjects who influenced the missionaries just as the latter influenced the Zulu. Referring to Bakhtin, she says:

a listener is never just a passive object but a subject equal to the speaker. The listener is an active participant who agrees or disagrees, adds to the speech and prepares his or her reaction and response based on the speaker’s utterances. Therefore, an utterance is formulated with the addressee in mind and with the speaker’s expectation of his or her reaction. According to Bakhtin, dialogue is not limited to words and utterances: it also includes human acts (Roaldset, 2020: 260–61).

Hence, even if one to a great extent is obliged to rely on missionary records and often is deprived of “an African point of view”, the missionary sources are huge and exceptionally rich not least due to the missionaries’ language expertise, often life-long experiences and first-hand information of local regions. By questioning them sharply, as the best historians have always done, and by exploiting the whole

²⁵ SEM Journal, Dahlberg (1925), Något om skolarbetet i Adis Abeba. En högtidlig avslutning, *Missions-Tidning*, 92 (5a), 71–73.

range of missionary records, including those of the opponents, one may—by asking new questions, using new theories and reading between the lines—also be able to relate some of the desires and aspirations of their African converts and surrounding societies and thus contribute to the writing of African history in a new global era.

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Military Campaigning Abroad and Women's Writing in Colonial Eritrea (1912–1918)



Massimo Zaccaria

Abstract Several scholars have observed how during the nineteenth and twentieth century new forms of literary expressions were experienced in Ethiopia and Eritrea. This significant phenomenon has been mostly analyzed by focusing on the works and writings of a very limited number of intellectuals, state officials, and civil servants. Little attention has been paid to private and informal ways of writing. Colonized women, in particular, are absent from this debate and thus there is a very limited evidence of female participation in this communicative transformation. This article argues that for most of the colonial period, Eritrean women embraced a new relationship with the written word that soon became an indispensable practice and a tool to negotiate their place in society. The prolonged campaigning of Eritrean troops abroad forced many soldiers' wives to adopt the use of letter writing as an effective tool for protecting their rights vis-à-vis their husbands and the colonial state. Using a selection of written records produced by soldiers' wives, this article presents writing as a practice that alongside inhibiting physical and territorial distance helped women to stand up for their rights, interests and dignity.

Keywords Letter writing · Women's correspondence · Italian colonial troops · Libya · Eritrea

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M. Zaccaria (✉)
Pavia University, Pavia, Italy
e-mail: zaccaria@unipv.it

Introduction

Despite its willingness to change, the academic world has been and remains a largely male fiefdom, an environment where the closer you get to the pinnacle of power, the more the female presence becomes liminal. I am convinced that the silent battle against this order of things remains a distinctive feature of Irma Taddia's career, of her being a woman in the Italian academy and of her daily scholarly activity.

This contribution starts from a brief note that Irma published in 1998, devoted to the Regional Archive at 'Addi Qäyyəḥ, a very special and in its own way extraordinary collection (Taddia, 1998: 423–5). Analyzing the documents present in the archive, Irma Taddia dwelt on private letters and recalled how the correspondence between ordinary people represented a new cultural phenomenon (Taddia, 1998: 425). With this comment, Irma Taddia continued a reasoning that she had started four years earlier. In an article she had published in the *Journal of African History* she had discussed a letter from the Tigrinya intellectual Gäbrä Egzi'abeḥēr to Mənilək II (Taddia, 1993: 493–516), that is an example of the new forms of literary expression that made their appearance in Ethiopia at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Taddia, 1990).

Starting from the study of a type of correspondence that was clearly elitist and political (Taddia, 1993), Irma soon moved on to the writings of subordinate groups, making use of the papers found in the archive of 'Addi Qäyyəḥ and then treasuring those preserved in the Giovanni Ellero Collection (Taddia et al., 1997). Thanks to the materials found in these two archives, Irma went beyond her analysis of the classical typologies of written documents that characterized the restricted milieu of the Ethiopian imperial court. Besides the chronicles, diplomatic correspondence, and sacred texts, she also examined legal appeals, diaries, journals, personal narratives and notes, private letters, and “other episodic material” (Taddia, 2011: 141–56), exploring types of written texts that Karin Barber tagged as “Tin-Trunk texts” (Barber, 2006).

One of the interesting outcomes of analyzing this private correspondence is that it brings us closer to the dimension of daily life, offering a micro-history of what it was like to live under colonial rule. It provides insights into the individuality of the lives of African protagonists and helps to grasp the social transformations and events that were produced (Korieh, 2010: 88). The analysis of this type of source remained a constant in Irma's work, marked by periodic returns, updates, and clarifications (Taddia, 2011: 151).

One aspect that still remains unexplored in Irma's work is that related to gender. Available studies outline a sphere of writing in which female voices are marginal, and the further we move away from the elite, the more this absence becomes glaring. Did women participate in this writing revolution? Were these letters a tool that helped women to stand up for their rights, interests, and dignity?

Research on the role of women in the societies of the Horn of Africa has long been a marginal topic, to the extent that, in 1981, Donald Crummey (1981: 444) wrote that “[nowhere does the Abyssinian literature treat seriously of women]”. An

observation that is certainly still valid, even if it would be unfair to say that nothing has been done in recent years. For Eritrea, the first efforts to investigate the writings of women focused almost exclusively on European women, as Carla Ghezzi (2003) has shown in her elegant prosopographic frescoes. It is certainly worth mentioning here Gianni Dore's work on the correspondence of Pia Maria Pezzoli, a research entirely devoted to female writing in the colonies (Pezzoli, 2004). The analysis of *madamato* and, later on, of mixed marriages has gradually shifted the emphasis to African women, making it possible to take a first step toward extending the research to colonized women (Barrera, 1996; Campassi, 1987; Iyob, 2000; Kibreab, 1995; Sorgoni, 1998; Tseggai, 1989). More recently, there have been several scholars who have turned their attention to the history of women in the Horn of Africa, such as Hanna Rubinkowska (2010), Silvia Bruzzi (2018), and Ruth Iyob (2019).

Traditionally, a good observation point on the spread of literacy among common people has been the army, as shown in the work of David Omissi (1999), who inaugurated the genre, and Santanu Das's (2018) most recent work, which perhaps represents one of its most accomplished forms. Inspired by this literature and by exploring samples of texts written by women, this article investigates how ordinary women used the written word at a particular juncture in the history of Eritrea, namely during the very early stages of the Libyan campaign. Starting from 1912, soldiers from the Horn of Africa were employed in military operations in Libya (Zaccaria, 2012). This article does not focus on the upper echelons of society. Rather, it deals with women who had no basic schooling and were often illiterate, but who nevertheless resorted to written communication in a functional way. Access to education for women was problematic in the societies of the Horn of Africa. Very likely, it was women's classes organized by the missionaries of the Swedish Evangelical Mission that opened the first real way for women to gain access to adult education (Berge, 2017: 87). However, the lack of educational opportunities did not preclude interaction with the written word. The most recent studies have shown how workers and the poor, even in the absence of formal education, have resorted to writing, that is—to borrow an expression of Arun Kumar's (2020: 153)—“independent writing-subjects”.

The material used in this article consists mainly of ordinary documents preserved by various colonial offices. A composite material, made up mostly of requests for information, compensation practices and claims for credits or subsidies. Papers where women's voices are often filtered by intermediaries and blurred by the continuous passages from the oral to the written form. Nonetheless, this is a body of messages and letters written by women, texts whose rarity reveals extremely interesting insights. The chronological context explored goes from 1912 to 1918 and is linked to the first years of the war in Libya. Delicate years, during which the Italian presence was progressively reduced to a few coastal locations and the men of the Eritrean Royal Corp of Colonial Troops [Regio Corpo Truppe Coloniali, hereafter RCTC] were put in charge of the operations following the return of the metropolitan troops to Italy.

Though filtered through the colonial archives, these materials reflect the needs, anxieties and conflicts deriving from the employment of askari abroad and make women's voices audible, while at the same time shedding light on the role of literacy among common people.

The article is divided into two major sections. The first explores the significant increase in written communication recorded in Eritrea at the beginning of the twentieth century, focusing on the causes that determined this transformation. The second examines some instances related to the employment of askari in Libya that involved the askari's wives, and that were also addressed through the use of writing.

A Sea of Paper

Eritrea boasts “an unusually high degree of literacy (by African standards)” (Ullendorff 1949: 64), as writing has been employed in the region for over a millennium. Thus, colonialism had nothing to do with the presence of writing, but no doubt it promoted its use and favored its practice, even among those social groups that had not previously used it.

Typically, when a “colonial subject” had to make an official request, this was written, registered, translated, summarized, and then archived. In many cases, the need to gather information and carry out checks generated intense correspondence between the various offices. Later, a postal system acted as a vehicle for this system, with efficient delivery over the territory and the capability of connecting the main towns of Eritrea in reasonable time (Bianchi, 1989; Cadioli, 1995; Crevato-Selvaggi & Macrelli, 2016).

Under these conditions, the widespread use of letters was inevitable, but the speed and intensity of the change equally took colonial administrators by surprise, who were bewildered by the exponential increase in the correspondence handled by their offices. In October 1920, the Regional Commissioner of Kärän, Vittorio Fioccardi, reported that his Commissariat was at a standstill, with hundreds of requests, letters and pleas. The overload was partly due to the work of the local administrators who, mainly for reasons of service, resorted with increasing frequency to written communications, so much so that Fioccardi described them as agitated by “a very exaggerated graphomaniacal spirit”.¹ But what above all surprised Fioccardi was the correspondence produced by private citizens; exasperated, he confessed that for some obscure reason the people of the Kärän Commissariat had become “a populace of scribes [... who...] at any whim smudges or has smudged a piece of paper”.² A flood of letters, petitions, gossip that Fioccardi considered absolutely pointless. The British, struggling with the same phenomenon in Sudan, had tried to contain the “indigenous graphomania” by requiring the use of stamped paper and envelopes for all communications sent to the colonial administration. Inspired by this model, Fioccardi suggested similar

¹ Archivio Storico Diplomatico del Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale (hereafter ASDMAE), Archivio Eritrea (hereafter AE) 893, fasc. 1, Vittorio Fioccardi to the Regent of the Government, Kärän 15 October 1920. I would like to thank Nicola Camilleri for generously sharing this document with me.

² *Ibidem*.

measures for Eritrea.³ The fact that in Asmāra's his request did not seem eccentric suggests that, almost certainly, the phenomenon reported was not unique to the Kärän Commissariat alone.

Even if the colonial bureaucracy actually encouraged the use of written communication, in Eritrea this phenomenon was reinforced by a contingent and very particular situation. Beginning in 1912, the men of the RCTC were regularly employed in Libya and later in Somalia, creating a completely new situation in which thousands Eritrean and Ethiopian soldiers found themselves spending long periods of time abroad. In these conditions, for many families the distance was mediated through the exchange of letters. The efficacy of letter-writing in maintaining a link with relatives at home was recognized immediately by the Army, which did all it could to spread its use among the troops (Zaccaria, 2013: 213–40). For example, it was decided to grant postal tax exemption to ordinary correspondence for the military in Libya; this provided a further incentive to its use.⁴ In this respect, the Italian army, rather than introducing a novelty, adhered to a consolidated practice. The other colonial armies had long before realized that the performance of the askari often depended on their ability to remain in regular contact with their hometowns and families. Letter-writing revealed itself as one of the simplest and most effective ways of preserving this link and, consequently, all the colonial armies did their utmost to increase its use. Thus, until the early 1930s, in the holds of boats traveling between Eritrea and Libya, alongside men, animals and goods, more and more letters began to travel.

To debunk a fairly widespread stereotype that sees the army as an environment indifferent to scholarization, military institutions have always favored quite the opposite, i.e., a strong interaction with writing and education. For this reason, the colonial armies have almost set aside spaces for learning. In the case of Eritrea, small and informal battalion schools were set up to encourage the spread of both the Italian language and basic literacy among the troops; there was also no shortage of special schools for graduates "where officers teach graduates to read and write in Italian, a smattering of arithmetic, geography and even departmental accounting".⁵ It was therefore no accident that the colonial troops liked to present themselves as "the first automatically and perpetually active school of civilization" (Pollera, 1935: 44).

A mobilized army is also a bureaucratic corps that produces a surprising amount of documents requiring a strong administrative apparatus. The Commissariats where enlistments were most intense were well aware of this. Describing that of Akkälä Guzay, its head, Giovanni Tornari, summed up the new situation as follows:

The office [Commissariat] provides all the numerous bits of information concerning military enlistments, the delivery of numerous discharge sheets with consequent participation in the centers of mobilization concerned, the distribution of medals and patents, the payment of allowances to families, the search for the heirs of deceased soldiers, the payment of sums

³ *Ibidem*.

⁴ ASDMAE AE 610, n. 0306, Giovanni Tornari to Direzione Affari Civili, 'Addi Qäyyoh, 3 March 1913.

⁵ "Arabi ascari e beduini a scuola", *Corriere dei Piccoli*, 6/15, 12 aprile 1914, p. 4.

owed to them, etc. as was already specified in previous reports; minute and continuous operations that absorb a large part of the Office's activity.⁶

We can get an idea of the volume of correspondence between Libya and Eritrea from the colonial records. For instance, each Commissariat sent the letters sent to the askari based in Libya first to the Directorate of Civil Affairs, which then forwarded it to the Eritrean RCTC. These items were recorded on special forms, where care was taken to also indicate the number of letters sent. For the period 15 May–31 December 1913, thirty such forms have survived concerning the mail both from and to Libya. In the seven and a half months taken into consideration, 915 letters left for Libya, while 474 were received in Eritrea. Although this exercise provides only a very approximate measure of the correspondence, it is evident that already in 1913 there was a significant exchange of messages between askari in Libya, their families and their acquaintances.⁷ These data are in line with what was recorded in other places: in 1915, for example, the 138,608 Indian soldiers based in France received between ten and twenty thousand letters per week, while between September and October 1914 in Sudan, the British authorities looking for sensitive information inspected some 50,000 letters (Kumar, 2020: 161).

Missing the Wives and the Children

As in other African contexts, in peacetime as in wartime, also in the Ethiopian plateau, women were camp followers of the armies, preparing food and transporting goods (Moyd, 2014: 24–8). The importance of women among the soldiers of the RCTC of Eritrea increased by virtue of the fact that, as all the available statistics show, most of the askari were married (Scardigli, 1996: 83–4). The Italian army immediately grasped the relevance of this aspect, and with the creation of the “family camps”—urban areas set up to accommodate the askari with their families—it met the needs of married askari, thus adapting to what also the other colonial powers were doing (Mann, 2006; Parsons, 1999; Thompson, 1990).

When the askari were called on to operate first in Somalia (1896–1897, 1920s) and later in Libya (1912–1930s), their deployment deeply affected their family life. “The distance from their homeland and their families” turned out to be an important factor, potentially capable of negatively affecting the discipline and the progress of enrollments.⁸ A situation that was very much in the forefront of the top echelons of

⁶ ASDMAE AE, fasc. Acchele Guzai, Giovanni Tornari, “Relazione circa le condizioni della Regione ed il funzionamento dell’Ufficio nel periodo dal 1 luglio al 30 giugno 1916”, ‘Addi Qäyyäh, 10 September 1916.

⁷ The forms are held in ASDMAE AE, 610.

⁸ ASDMAE Archivio Storico Ministero Africa Italiana (hereafter ASMAI) 115/1/9, Maggiore Tinto RCTC, 11 November 1912, n. 111, “Durata dei distaccamenti di battaglioni indigeni in Libia, 1912–1913”.

the Italian army, since the Ministry of War also referred to the “close attachment” of the askari to their families (Vitale, 1960: 193).

How would the askari react to being separated from their wives and families? The problem first arose between 1896 and 1897, when two companies of Eritrean askari were sent to Somalia. By September 1897 the men of the 4th Company of the 2nd Battalion had spent six months of service in the Mogadishu area, and their commander wrote that “[...] far from their families, they suffer from homesickness, and wish only to return to their country, even at the cost of leaving the service as soon as their draft period is over”.⁹ The result was an army that was largely unmotivated, not always easy to command, and “surly”.¹⁰

In some cases, the prospect of having to separate themselves from their families had induced some askari to give up their missions abroad. This was the case of the Somali *sciumbasci* (marshal) Muḥammad Jamil, who in 1912 declined the invitation to leave for Libya precisely because he did not want to be separated from his family made up of “various wives and children, whom he does not wish to distance from the Colony”.¹¹

The problem cropped up again when the askari were employed in Libya, but on a very different scale. This time it was no longer just a few hundred men who left for the front, but thousands of volunteers. That the Italians wanted could do their military service with a “light heart”.¹² There was an immediate discussion about whether or not to allow some askari to take their family members along. As we have seen, in Eritrea this possibility existed and was appreciated by the commanders. But, as in the case of Somalia, also for Libya the Italian army did not consider it appropriate to allow the wives to follow their husbands. It was a much debated decision. Other colonial armies had ended up granting such permission. For example, during the Nile Expedition of 1884, the Sudanese battalions were allowed to be accompanied by family members. Similarly, few years later, the Germans granted their Sudanese recruits the same privilege (Moyd, 2014: 49). The French were doing so in Morocco where they authorized the *tirailleurs sénégalais* to take along their *mesdames tirailleurs* (Zimmerman, 2011: 299–322; Zimmerman, 2020).

The opposition of the wives to their husbands' doing military service in Libya was evident. In addition to the emotional stress of estrangement, in the early days of the Libyan campaign the payment of allowances to families was irregular, exposing women to difficulties and uncertainties that were a source of constant tensions. When at the end of 1912 the possibility of extending military service in Libya from six to twelve months was being considered, the askari asked “insistently that the payment

⁹ Archivio dell'Ufficio Storico dello Stato Maggiore dell'Esercito (hereafter AUSSMAE), D3 Somalia, B5 Carteggio Somalia F2, Carlo Caneva to Ministero della Guerra, “Ritorno di ascari da Mogadiscio”.

¹⁰ AUSSMAE D3 Somalia, B5 Carteggio Somalia F2, Report to RCTC of Eritrea, Mogadishu 2 September 1897, “Ritorno di ascari da Mogadiscio”.

¹¹ ASDMAE ASMAI 115/1/7, Governo Mogadishu to Ministero della Guerra, Mogadishu 22 November 1912, “Ascari eritrei e somali (novembre–dicembre)”.

¹² ASDMAE ASMAI 115/1/9, Major Tinto to RCTC, 11 November 1912, n. 111, “Durata dei distaccamenti di battaglioni indigeni in Libia, 1912–1913”.

of allowances to families be better stipulated” to remedy one of the greatest sources of concern for their wives.¹³

In December 1911, the enlistment conditions for the troops leaving for Libya were set at double the usual wage, half of which was payable to families in Eritrea.¹⁴ In the new situation created by the wartime transfer, the families of the askari, and above all their wives, became an important point of reference for the colonial administration. In the absence of their husbands, the ascaris’ wives became the privileged interlocutors of the colonial administration. At the same time, their *pro tempore* role as family heads and the money they managed favored, among other things, a progressive monetization of the family economy.

Their needs were carefully considered by the administration, which, in case of need, was ready to provide for the families of the ascaris, in addition to the families of those ascaris who died in service (or similar).¹⁵ For the colonial state, the concern for the needs of the soldiers and their families remained a priority. For this reason, the ban on bringing family members abroad was subjected to periodic re-evaluations. In August 1914, General Ameglio, governor of Cyrenaica, asked that Eritrean troops be accompanied by family members.¹⁶ A year later, the request of one askari’ wife of the VIII Battalion to accompany her husband to Libya, though peremptorily rejected on the basis of “the provisions currently in force”, gave the Governor of Eritrea the excuse he needed to specify that the case was not an isolated one, and to suggest to the Ministry of Colonies to “examine whether it was not appropriate to grant the askari being mobilized for the Libyan campaign permission to take their families along”.¹⁷

On the part of the authorities, the fear was that the wives, left alone in the cities, might get involved in new relationships or even turn to prostitution.¹⁸ On this point, the concerns of the authorities coincided with the anxieties of the soldiers, and created the conditions for the decision to more or less forcibly repatriate women to their husbands’ villages of origin, a decision taken in the initial stages of the Libyan campaign and motivated as a measure to defend decency and public order.¹⁹ The plan to “moralize” the Eritrean capital was only partially successful. When it was above all Ethiopians who began to enlist, no few of them decided to take along their families, who, pending the conclusion of their husbands’ enlistments, were left in

¹³ ASDMAE ASMAI 115/1/9, Major Edoardo Suarez to Comando RCTC of Eritrea, 16 November 1912, n. 87 ris., “Durata dei distaccamenti di battaglioni indigeni in Libia, 1912–1913”.

¹⁴ ASMAI 115/1, Paolo Spingardi to Michele Rubiolo, Roma 12 December 1911, fasc. 6 “Ascaris eritrei e somali (settembre–ottobre)”.

¹⁵ ASDMAE ASMAI 115/1/9, Giovanni Tornari to Governo dell’Eritrea, ‘Addi Qäyyäh 11 novembre 1912, n. 4508, “Durata dei distaccamenti di battaglioni indigeni in Libia, 1912–1913”.

¹⁶ Ferdinando Martini to Giuseppe Salvago Raggi, Roma 17 August 1914, n. 2363, cit. in Vitale (1960: 202).

¹⁷ ASDMAE AE 694, Governo a Ministero delle Colonie, Asmara 30 July 1915, n. 1,387,708.

¹⁸ ASDMAE ASMAI 115/1/9, Major Luigi Solari to Comando RCTC of Eritrea, 31 November 1912, n. 1930, “Durata dei distaccamenti di battaglioni indigeni in Libia, 1912–1913”.

¹⁹ ASDMAE ASMAI 115/1/9, Rubiolo to Governo dell’Eritrea, 31 December 1912, n. 1530 R.S., “Durata dei distaccamenti di battaglioni indigeni in Libia, 1912–1913”.

Asmāra, thus frustrating Italian efforts to keep the wives of askari away from the cities.²⁰

In most of the research devoted to war and writing, scholars have been attracted by the correspondence between soldiers and their families. It is however important to point out that this was only one side of the issue, and perhaps not even the most important one, of the relationship between the war situation and writing. An important part of the written production generated by war involves other types of messages and communications: certificates, notifications, requests for information, maintenance checks and recompenses were all areas in which the administration came into contact with the soldiers' families, and generally their wives. During these exchanges, the written communication overlapped with the oral one, without a precise hierarchy. When the wives contacted the colonial administration, they did so by showing up at the Commissariats to present their requests. The colonial documents state that "she introduced herself", "supplicates", "pleads". But then it was the Commissariat staff that dispatched the paperwork and proceeded with the necessary background checks.

According to the archival documentation, one of the most recurrent causes was that of non-payment of maintenance checks.²¹ The great number of recipients and of administrative checks needed to process their requests, not to mention the long distances, meant that the claims tended to proceed very slowly. In a case that might be considered fairly emblematic, a claim was initiated in March 1917 and was closed only 19 months later.²² In another, a certain Fāṭima Muḥammad presented herself to the Regional Commissariat of Massawa, claiming that she had written to her husband to send her money because she had run out of what he had left her. The fact that Fāṭima Muḥammad was "absolutely without means, in an environment like this where she has neither acquaintances nor relatives", prompted the authorities to contact the administration of Cyrenaica.²³

Another situation that favored closer contact between the colonial administration and the soldiers' families was imprisonment. On several occasions, askari felt prisoners of Libyans, and their detention often lasted a considerable time, prompting families to contact the administration insistently with requests for news. In November 1917, it was decided to grant to the families of captive askari the possibility of

²⁰ ASDMAE AE 727, Sailer to Ministry of Colonies, Asmāra 31 May 1914.

²¹ See for example the case of Woba Maasciò from 'Addi Gabul, the mother of six children, who in July 1918 turned to the Regional Commissioner of Seraè to obtain from her husband, askari of the 2nd company of the 16th battalion in Libya, the maintenance for her and her children: ASDMAE AE 887, Paolo Teodorani to Direzione Affari Civili, Addi Ugri [Mändāfāra], 29 July 1918, 10822/30.

²² This is the case of the lawsuit brought by Dästa Šifta against the Buluk-Bashi Gabru Marša. The exchange of documents related to the lawsuit involved the following branches of the administration: Commissariato dell'Akkälä Guzay, Comando RCTC Asmāra, 4° compagnia del 2° battaglione, Libia; Direzione Affari Civili del Governo dell'Eritrea. Cfr. ASDMAE AE 866.

²³ ASDMAE AE 694, Regional Commissioner of Massawa to Governo dell'Eritrea, Massawa, 1 September 1915.

requesting half of the pay due to the prisoner.²⁴ Predictably, after the publication of this provision, there was an increase in the cases of relatives and wives of prisoners in Libya who contacted the offices of the colonial administration. Among them, Buzu Ṭānāčin, who in February 1918 claimed to be the sister of Māngāša Tuku’ə, a prisoner in Mişūrāta, and requested half of his pay.²⁵ This is a relevant example because this kind of letters are quite rare. These requests could have very different outcomes, but usually they ended up generating fairly substantial exchanges of correspondence, whose traces remain in the archives.

This Command is Sorry to Have to Communicate to This Honorable Government the Death of the Below Noted Native Recruits

Unfortunately, there is no war without casualties. It is very difficult to establish the number of losses suffered by the RCTC of Eritrea in Libya. The indications, though fragmentary, suggest that they were substantial, in combat as well as due to sickness. Notifying families of the death or injury of their loved ones was a delicate task for the colonial administration. The recommendation was to make a prompt communication, perhaps following the indications of the Daily Order of 5 March 1912, which specified that “[notification to the Bureau Office will be accompanied by the dispatch of money and valuables of the deceased, which must be remitted to the family]”.²⁶ However, the official announcement was often overridden by the news relayed by fellow soldiers of the victim. This created an understandable embarrassment for the administration, That wanted to avoid to give the impression that the Government was indifferent to the fate of its soldiers. In order not to compromise the recruitment, Prime Minister Giolitti himself recommended to the Minister of War “to immediately send a large subsidy to the families of the askari who died in combat”, which amounted to one hundred Maria Theresa Thalers.²⁷

Despite the efforts of the authorities, there was no shortage of cases in which the communication of demise lagged, and the families of the fallen learned of the death of their loved ones from newly returned comrades. For example, in May 1913, the family of the *muntaz* (corporal) Tādla Woldenki’el (4th battalion) appealed to

²⁴ Decreto Luogotenenziale n. 1870, published on the *Gazzetta Ufficiale del Regno d’Italia*, n. 275, 22 November 1917, pp. 4732–4733.

²⁵ The investigations relating to this case began on 22 July 1916 when the Director of Civil Affairs contacted the Commercial Agent of Adua (ASDMAE, AE 837). Authorization to proceed was granted two years later, cfr. ASDMAE AE 837, De Martino to Comando RCTC, Asmāra 4 July 1918. A similar case in ASDMAE, AE 887.

²⁶ ASDMAE ASMAI, 115/1, Comando del Corpo di Occupazione della Libia, Ordine del Giorno n. 100, Tripoli, 5 March 1912, fasc. 3 “Ascari eritrei e somali”.

²⁷ ASDMAE ASMAI, 115/1, fasc. 3 “Ascari eritrei e somali”, Paolo Spingardi to Di San Giuliano, Roma, 15 April 1912. By the mid nineteenth century, Maria Theresa Thaler had become the most popular currency in circulation in Ethiopia.

the Commissioner of Kärän, Vittorio Fioccardi, to confirm the rumor of their loved one's death so that they could organize his *Tescar* [the memorial feast for the dead].²⁸ On another occasion, Wārḥatu Mihiru reported to the Italian administration that she had heard of her husband's death from his fellow soldiers, while other askari had written to her that her husband's personal effects had been mailed to Eritrea.²⁹ For the families of the Ethiopian askari, the task was even more complex and usually fell to one of the three Italian Commercial Agency in Ethiopia, which, however, was not always able to identify the family members.³⁰ The deceased askari often left behind their savings, which by rights belonged to their closest relatives; moreover, in the event of death, the family members were owed four months' pay.³¹

Cases were not rare in which the family members of the deceased came into conflict with the askari's wife. Issues of indemnity and compensation prompted various family members to claim what were often conflicting rights. The Government tended to favor compromise solutions, but when no agreement was possible the wife was usually favored if she could demonstrate the validity of the marriage.³² The problem had already arisen the day after the battle of Adwa, when it became the subject of a parliamentary questioning by the Hon. Arturo Galletti of Cadilhac. The Minister of War, Ricotti, replied to him that, in the event of an askari's death, his wife was entitled to receive an indemnity equivalent to nine-month salary (approximately L. 500).³³

In 1917 Yäšumənäši 'Adāmā, wife of an askari to the 15th battalion who had fallen in Libya, claimed her husband's belongings.³⁴ To formalize her claim, Yäšumənäši 'Adāmā wrote, or much more likely asked someone to write for her, a letter in which she presented her case and provided all the elements necessary to support her request.³⁵

²⁸ ASDMAE AE 610, Vittorio Fioccardi to Governo dell'Eritrea, 26 May 1913, telegram no. 196 R. S.: "This may give rise to the supposition in these families that the Government is somewhat neglecting this pitiful office. These families cannot conceive that the Government is not aware of events that have happened in Libya and that are reported by soldiers who have returned to the Colony".

²⁹ ASDMAE AE 837, Governo Asmāra to Governo della Cirenaica, muntaz Hamptonkiel Kefle, Asmāra 10 May 1916, 3619.

³⁰ ASDMAE AE 610, Michele Rubiolo to Governo della Colonia, Asmāra 5 June 1913, n. 6539, reports the case of the askari Idrīs Īmān, 3rd company of the 8th battalion, from Ada (Šāwa) who died in al-Marj (Merg). The Agenzia Commerciale Italiana of Däse was asked to communicate the news of the death to the family.

³¹ ASDMAE AE 610, Sailer to Governo Asmāra, Asmāra 11 January 1913, n. 420.

³² ASDMAE AE 610. In October 1913, the father of an askari who died in Libya asked to obtain his son's belongings. After hearing the opinion of the Qāḍī, the Government granted a pension of 22 Maria Theresa Thalers to the wife and son of the soldier Commissariato Regionale dell'Ĥamasen to Governo Asmāra, Asmāra 14 October 1913, n. 5901.

³³ M. P. Ricotti, *Atti Parlamentari*, Camera dei Deputati, Legislatura XIX, 1° sessione, discussioni tornata del 30 aprile 1896, p. 3744.

³⁴ ASDMAE AE 837, RCTC dell'Eritrea a Governo della Colonia, Asmāra 14 July 1917, n. 7016.

³⁵ ASDMAE AE 837, Yäšumənäši 'Adāmā to Alessandro Allori, Asmāra 22 May 1917, the original letter was in Amharic with the Italian translation attached and signed by the interpreter Māḥari.

ክቡር ጌታዮ ከፊቢሪ፡ ከማንዳትሪ፡ አሎሪ
 ከፍ ያለ ክቡር፡ ሰላምታ ፡አቅርቤ፡ ጊዜ፡ ሰላምታ
 አቀርባለሁ፡
 ጌታዮ፡ ይስሙኝ ድ፡ ነገር፡ ልነባረዋ፡ እኔ፡ ባሪያዋ፡
 የኔ፡ ባል፡ ስሙ፡ ተገን፡ በጋላ፡ አሜባል፡ ትሪቡሊ፡
 ኩንድቸዚሞ፡ በተሊዮኒ፡ ብሪማ፡ ኩባንያ፡
 ቆስሎ፡ በፈርመርያ፡ ሞተ፡ ገንዘቡንም፡
 ተቀብለው፡ ያኖሩት፡ በአስቢደሊያ፡ ነው፡
 በዚህ፡ ነገርም፡ ከጌታው፡ ከሜሳሪዮ፡ ብዙ፡ ቀን፡
 ተመላለስሁ፡፡
 አሁን፡ ወደ፡ አፈሪ፡ ትሪሊ፡ ዘንድ፡ ሂጄ፡ አሉኝ፡
 መጣሁ፡፡ የቸርነትዋን፡ ስራ፡ ይስሩልኝ፡ ብዮ፡
 እለምነዋ፡ አለሁ፡ ባሪያዋ፡ የሹምነሻ፡ አደም፡፡
 ዓመ፡ በ ግንበት፡ አስመራ
 1917 5,21

Most honorable sir Cavalier Commendator Allori.

By offering you my most respectful greetings, I pay you my respects repeatedly.

Sir, I beg you to hear the plea of me, your slave.

My husband Tägän Bägala went to Tripoli with the 15th battalion, first company.

Wounded in combat he was admitted to the hospital where he died. The hospital took and deposited his money.

On this matter I went to His Excellency the Commissario several times.

Now they told me to go to Civil Affairs.

So, Sir, I have come here, I beg you to act from the goodness of your heart.

Your slave Yäšumənäši ‘Adämə.

Asmara, May 21, 1917.

The RCTC of Eritrea launched a series of investigations that lasted for more than a year. In the end, the deposition of Qäsis Ogbazien Ḥagos, her husband's confessor in Libya, made it possible to ascertain that her husband had actually named her as his heir.³⁶

Again, in the event of death, it was not always easy to establish who the legitimate heir was. This often required extensive correspondence between the various offices, and then between Eritrea and Libya. To avoid this situation, some soldiers began to

³⁶ ASDMAE AE 837, Governo dell'Eritrea to RCTC dell'Eritrea, [Asmāra] 17 July 1918, 10,109/30.

draw up actual wills, such as the one submitted by an askari's sister presented to the RCTC command once the news of his death was officially communicated.³⁷

Much of the correspondence concerned arrears, benefits and bonuses. Gämbär Gebra 'i, the wife of a Tigray askari who died "fighting bravely" in Libya, wrote to the Government on several occasions in order to be recognized as her husband's rightful heir and thus be entitled to receive his wages and subsidies.³⁸ Often, in the event of death, the sums involved were considerable. For example, in 1912 a family was granted an indemnity of L. 300, the same amount paid to the families of Italian soldiers.³⁹ For decorated soldiers, a very precise reward system had been in place since 1913, which included an award of L. 300 for the silver medal, L. 100 for the bronze medal and L. 50 for the solemn commendation and which, in case of death, went to the family.⁴⁰

Fāṭima Muḥammad of Tarhūna Daughter of Muhammad 'Umar Makes Her Case

Apart from the military sphere, we know very little about the life of askari during their service in Libya and how they related to the local population. Thus, the story of Tarhūna's Fāṭima Muḥammad is rather unique, as it allows us to have a glimpse on the relationship between the askari and Libyan women. At the beginning of May 1916, the Commissioner of Akkälä Guzay received a letter signed by Fāṭima Muḥammad, born in Tarhūna, a city about sixty kilometers southeast of Tripoli. Fāṭima wrote that in 1912 she had married the Eritrean *muntaz* Muḥammad Ibrāhīm, a Bilen from Kārān, who was part of the I Libyan Battalion. When Muḥammad Ibrāhīm was furloughed, he returned to Eritrea with Fāṭima and settled in 'Addi Qäyyəḥ. Fāṭima stated that her husband treated her "passably well", and around 1914 the two had a son. In mid-February 1916, Muḥammad Ibrāhīm, now a bricklayer, moved to Asmāra, most likely for work reasons, but his whereabouts soon became unknown, while his wife, deprived of support, had no choice but to turn to the authorities. A search was begun, first in Asmāra, then in Massawa, but in both instances to no avail.⁴¹ The case was still open in March 1918, with the authorities unable to locate her husband and Fāṭima Muḥammad, who by now declared herself "abandoned" and, seeing that her

³⁷ ASDMAE AE 837, Col. G. Pantano to Governo della Colonia, Asmāra 26 June 1916, n. prot. 5838.

³⁸ ASDMAE AE 837, one of these letters, written on 18 February 1919 and sent to the Direzione Affari Civili, is held prot. 2261/12.

³⁹ Paolo Spingardi, to Di San Giuliano, Roma 12 May 1912, cit. in Vitale (1960: 196–7).

⁴⁰ ASDMAE AE 610, Circolare RCTC Eritrea to all Regional Commissariats, 9 October 1913.

⁴¹ 'Addi Qäyyəḥ Regional Archive (hereafter AQRA), Law Unclassified Deputy Regional Commissioner of Kārān to Regional Commissioner of the Akkälä Guzay, 16 October 1917, "Donna libica Omar Fatma [...] di Tarhuna".

husband had not made the deposit for the “repatriation fund”, asked the Government to authorize her repatriation and to cover the travel expenses for her and her child.⁴²

Fāṭima’s story presents us with a rather singular but significant case, a marriage between a Libyan woman and an Eritrean askari. Surely, a fairly rare situation but one that suggests the existence of quite unexpected interactions between Libyan society and askari. Despite the stigma of being abandoned and finding herself alone in a country that was not hers, Fāṭima decided to take control of her and her son’s destiny by planning a return to Libya, which she wanted to negotiate with the colonial authorities. Plausibly, her ability to exploit the written word strengthened her request, which actually was not rejected but led to a series of investigations to determine the facts and then evaluate her right to repatriation.

At the basis of Fāṭima’s appeal was her awareness that her union with her husband had legal status and that as such it offered a series of protections that Fāṭima was gradually able to exploit. Her desire to return to Libya might indicate the persistence of a link with her motherland, but also a certain social position, since Fāṭima claimed that her father was a merchant originally from Tripoli. The decision to present her case to the authorities, requesting the dissolution of her marriage, custody of her son, and her return to Libya at the Government’s expense, show considerable independence and awareness of her rights, even in the dire straits in which she had suddenly found herself.

Conclusions

In terms of the number of people involved and the duration of their service, the use of troops from the Horn of Africa in Libya was the first experience of global connections and interactions for a large portion of the region’s population. For almost thirty years, enlisting in the army and serving abroad promised a hard life experience for many Eritreans and Ethiopians, but also a window onto the world. The protagonists of this dislocation were not the intellectual elites but the tens of thousands of ordinary people who for military reasons left the country and went to areas as far away as Libya and Somalia. Hence the “increasingly clear perception of the world beyond Ethiopia” (Taddia, 1993: 495) that spread throughout the society of the Ethiopian plateau at the end of the nineteenth century did not concern just Mənilək II’s court, but in the early twentieth century it acquired the connotations of a real mass experience.

The growing number of women using a combination of oral and written means of communication draws attention to an important process taking place in Eritrea and Ethiopia in the years of the Italian invasion of Libya: the use of the written word among common people and the emergence of popular correspondence and letter writing. Soldiers and their families started relying significantly on letter writing to mediate the distance that had been generated, and growing segments of the society

⁴² AQRA, Law Unclassified, “Donna libica Omar Fatma [...] di Tarhuna”, letter by Fāṭima Muḥammad attached to the report 2 May 1916.

started to master the art of popular letter writing. Convinced that the letters had a stabilizing effect on the askari, the Italian army did everything to encourage their use, contributing to the popularization of this practice.

While toward the beginning of the twentieth century we witness the democratization of letter-writing practices, personal correspondence was only one form of writing used by common people. Preparing briefs, requests for information, subsidies and pensions were all areas through which the population related to the colonial system, becoming familiar with its mechanisms, but, above all, striving to protect their rights. In this new context, unexpected spaces opened up for women. In the absence of their husbands, the wives of askari were recognized by the colonial administration as legitimate family heads. Through an intense interaction with the colonial bureaucracy—often mediated by the written word—women were able to acquire areas of autonomy, first by becoming interlocutors of the colonial administration, then by being recognized for the compensation of goods or the inheritances of their husbands.

The traces of this interaction are scattered throughout colonial and private archives, often in their less frequented corners, those that mostly preserve heaps of administrative documents and forms, those that by some miracles have never been thrown into the archival waste bins. Not infrequently, this paperwork captures small bits of lives that would otherwise have been forgotten, but which for a brief moment speak out and narrate. Responding to the points Irma makes in her article *Il silenzio dei colonizzati e il lavoro dello storico* (Taddia, 1991) while it can be said that women in the Horn of Africa have been represented as absent and silent, the little sea of paper linked to the employment of askari abroad is one of those rare occasions that grant women not only some degree of visibility but also, however faintly, some degree of audibility.

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The Private and the Public in the Colonial Archive

Colonial Encounters and Land Tenure in Early Italian Rule in Africa. A Critical Enquiry into Recently Rediscovered Personal Papers of Leopoldo Franchetti



Federica Guazzini

Abstract To what extent is it possible to disclose an epistemic coloniality within a corpus of primary sources related to encounters with Otherness in the Italian colonies in Africa from the late 1880s till the eve of the First World War? This paper draws on newly rediscovered private diaries and letters related to fieldworks conducted in the African colonies with the aim of analyzing the local land systems which paved the way for settler societies. A preliminary critical analysis of the manuscripts allows an understanding of colonial taxonomies in the making, and how they depended on African intermediaries, whose knowledge informed the colonizers of social and individual disputes, as well as on the local balance of power. The manuscripts are the outcomes of extensive traveling, eyewitness accounts and evidence gathered on the location. Thus, their study contributes to deciphering the framed view of African territories, and the methods employed to manage people's lives, providing insights into the issue of land tenure during early colonial rule.

Keywords Africa · Italian empire · Settler colonialism · Colonial sources · Leopoldo Franchetti

When Karin Pallaver and Uoldelul Chelati Dirar asked me to contribute to this volume, I began to reflect on how to intersect the focus of the edited volume on primary sources with the main topics of interest of Irma Taddia. A widely acknowledged leading scholar in the field of African history, who has devoted decades of research to broaden and deepen the understanding of fundamental issues related to the socio-political history of late nineteenth century and twentieth century Eritrea and Ethiopia. She provides insightful analyses by integrating historical modes of inquiry with fieldwork, culminating in remarkable and outstanding achievements. Among her most innovative studies, the groundbreaking monograph *L'Eritrea colonia 1890–1952. Paesaggi, strutture, uomini del colonialismo* (Taddia, 1986) stands out, where she illuminates in rich detail the social transformations of Italian agricultural policies

F. Guazzini (✉)

Università per Stranieri di Perugia, Perugia, Italy

e-mail: federica.guazzini@unistrapg.it

on the local peasant production with a focus on Christian, Tigrinya-speaking people of the central Eritrean highlands and their forms of land tenure.

Part of the historian's craft is the identification of new sources, and it seems fitting in this chapter to present primary source material, hitherto unpublished and unknown to scholars. This paper—which is somehow a preview of more extensive and detailed ongoing work—provides the opportunity to reflect on the role of colonial archives in reconstructing the history of Italian settler colonialism.

Being the least of Europe's great powers, Italy was a late comer in a period of imperial rivalry and competition between the major European powers to get control of African territories (Labanca, 2015). It is known that the need to provide disenfranchised and landless Italian peasants with land to farm without de-nationalizing them was one of the most common themes in Italian colonial propaganda from the very beginning. Nevertheless, a lack of adequate funds and support from the metropolitan government, coupled with the resistance of local populations was a setback for those liberal Italians who deeply cherished dreams of mass settlement. Not surprisingly, settler colonialism in the Italian African colonies has received less theoretical attention in comparison to other European empires, especially the British. The historiography of the Italian settler colonial past has largely focused on the fascist period (Cresti, 1996, 2011; Ertola, 2017) when more intensive governmental endeavors for fostering migration to the colonies reached its climax after the conquest of Ethiopia in 1936. A period for which there is an abundance of primary sources in public and private archives, many of which have entered in various collections.

However, Italian colonial archives have suffered from fragmentation, both because of the lack of a unified central registry in Italy (Barrera, 2013; Ferrara, 1996; Pellegrini, 1996) and being stored in peripheral colonial archives (Baldinetti 2000; Di Pasquale, 2017; Locatelli, 2004; Taddia, 1998). Additionally, many files did not survive World War II (Deplano, 2019). Records suffered serious losses through looting, destruction and seizure both when files were transferred from Rome to northern Italy, in the Italian Social Republic, from September 1943 to spring 1945 and because of partial repatriation from the Horn of Africa. In the Italian Republic, historical research has thus been hampered for decades by the impossibility to access a large body of official colonial records. Apologetic reconstructions and layers of official myth-making (Del Boca, 2003) resonated for a long time, challenged first by historians such as Angelo Del Boca and Giorgio Rochat and further generations of scholars.

Leopoldo Franchetti's personal papers are thus an additional source that can shed new light on this history. A long-standing member of the Italian Parliament and a leading figure in the institutional landscape of liberal Italy, Franchetti was a passionate advocate of the interests of the landless peasants in southern Italy.¹ His

¹ Franchetti worked to understand and alleviate the appalling conditions of the poor in the South, where land imbalances, administrative corruption, and brigands intertwined, fuelling the poverty of the peasants. He tackled the so-called "Southern Question" by adopting a method of investigation under the banner of methodological positivism, which postulated the necessity of fieldwork. In the two-year period 1873–74, he travelled alone, on foot, on horseback, or in a carriage in the most remote areas of Abruzzo, Molise, Calabria and Basilicata. In 1875, he visited the Sicilian provinces

personal papers are in part related to the Italian colonization of Africa and represent a valuable resource for the study of settler colonialism and Italian imperialism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Another piece in the jigsaw of the impressive collection of archival sources scattered across the Horn of Africa and Europe.

In the first section of this paper, I will provide a brief overview of the methodological ways of working with the typology of sources such as private papers of prominent white figures in colonial Africa. In the second section, I will present a succinct description of Franchetti's colonial files, and I will outline some possible lines of research.

In order to make good use of an archive, it is important to frame how it was created, by whom, and for what purposes. Ketelaar (2001: 137) rightly highlights that the meaning of the archive derives not only from its contents, but also from the uses to which the contents are put and the motivations for that use. It is the time taken to scrutinize the archives, not merely as the object but also the subject of enquiry, that is a necessary precondition for research. This is not about the accidental discovery in an archive of obscure and often fragmentary narratives preserved in ego-documents. In November 2016, the Italian Ministry for Cultural Heritage awarded a grant to the national scientific committee working on the cultural programme "Leopoldo Franchetti on the centenary of his death (1847–1917)".² This committee adopted a trans-disciplinary approach and promoted a series of events—conferences and seminars—where scholars, taking stock of ongoing works, presented new research with the aim of re-opening the historical debate on the role Franchetti played in the society of his time (Nicolosi, 2021; Pace, 2020; Rogari 2019).

Within this effort, I was asked to shed new light on the colonial work of Leopoldo Franchetti. The initial request was to re-frame Franchetti's activity in Eritrea. However, my focus shifted to his overseas life, Franchetti being one of the very few Italian policy-makers who spent time in each of the colonial possessions in Africa—namely, Eritrea, Somalia, and Libya—during the first stage of Italian rule, grappling with the challenges of exploiting the territories (Guazzini, 2019). Franchetti did not content himself with being an "armchair expert", reading the materials collected by others—missionaries, traders, explorers, or colonial officials—but wanted to investigate the matter in person, traveling and combining fieldwork with surveys and experimental methods.

Franchetti committed suicide on November 4, 1917, after the Italian defeat of Caporetto in World War I. Subsequently, his estate was sold at auction and for a long time it was assumed that his personal colonial records were lost. However, this was

with Sidney Sonnino and Enea Cavalieri. He thus proposed agrarian reform as an urgent priority for the Italian state, to alleviate the condition of the poor and to stem the migratory haemorrhage of peasant farmers. According to Nelson Moe (1998), exploring and deploring the roots of the so-called southern "diversity", Franchetti helped to give life to a new vision of southern Italy. See also Moe (2020).

² Istituto storico per il pensiero liberale (ISPLI) and Associazione nazionale per gli interessi del Mezzogiorno d'Italia (ANIMI) led jointly this project in the two-year period 2016–2018 (D. M. 15/11/2016, rep. 516).

not the case. During the 1930s, Fascism relegated Franchetti to public oblivion. In part because of his failures and because he was a jew, despite the fact that Franchetti himself was agnostic and a strong supporter of laity. Following World War II, Italy lost its colonies, and was eager to look ahead focusing on socio-economic developmental challenges instead of reflecting on its colonial past. A few years ago, the National Association for the Interests of Southern Italy announced that it had preserved the portion of Franchetti's papers, which are related to his presidency of the association.³

Even more recently it was discovered that Franchetti's colonial papers were probably donated by Umberto Zanotti Bianco to Istituto per l'Oriente Carlo Alfonso Nallino. We have no idea of the original order and organization of this archival collection. This archive was originally designed as a tool for keeping track of Franchetti's governmental activities in Eritrea, preserving the notes also to ensure an accurate report of the results of his activities. The documents include his own testimonies in the form of field studies in diary extracts with dense annotations, sketches, letters and postcards written to and by colonial officers and underlings, suppliers, and contractors, and a few Italian policy-makers. There is no attempt to tell the story of his life in the African colonies, neither to frame in coherent intimate details the lives of those who surrounded him, but these sources provide an insider account and analysis of interwoven power structures in each of the Italian colonies in Africa, and thus are highly revealing of the ideas that guided colonial policies and indigenous agency.

Concerning the creation and storage of the archive, we do not know much about the process of selection, recorded information may have been later excluded and discarded or preserved by Franchetti. The current archival arrangement can most likely be ascribed to Umberto Zanotti Bianco (1950), an intellectual who supported Franchetti in the National Association for the Interests of Southern Italy. Zanotti Bianco made a selection of Franchetti's personal papers posthumously, and then handed the colonial collection to the Istituto per l'Oriente Carlo Alfonso Nallino, in Rome, where it is currently preserved. This process can be seen as part of the dynamics of an archival collection, which are worthy of study in their own right (MacNeil, 2008). Since the 2000s, the relevance of analyzing cultural texts and primary sources considering them in a continuous state of becoming has been accepted by scholars. When a documentary collection is resituated and recontextualized in different environments and by different actors, this process inevitably affects the original order of the body of records and provides further hints for re-reading the same sources.

Franchetti's colonial archive is composed of four manuscript volumes related to his experience in Eritrea (1889–1894)—where he was appointed as special deputy for Eritrean settlement—and of the months he spent in Benadir (1908), and in Tripolitania (1913). The time frame from late 1880s to the eve of World War I is the one that has been frequently covered by narrative and thematic histories of Italian colonialism (Finaldi, 2016; Labanca, 2002). It appears from Franchetti's notes that sometimes they were taken as a straightforward chronicle of what happened during the journey,

³ *Carte di e su Leopoldo Franchetti conservate dall'Associazione Nazionale per gli interessi del Mezzogiorno d'Italia (ANIMI)*, inventory edited by Leonardo Musci, 2018.

reporting landscapes, meetings, and impressions. Franchetti also retraced what he deemed to be important, at times weeks after the event more in nature of working notes than annotations to justify his actions rather than introspective self-reflection, or self-observation, which rarely peeps out from the handwritten pages. Contrary to writings of those in similar situations, for example the four volumes *Diario Eritreo* by Ferdinando Martini (1943), the colonial Governor of Eritrea from 1897 to 1907, who frequently vents his feelings, Franchetti did not let go. It is possible that Franchetti originally conceived these notes as travelogues intended for the public at large, having in mind the publication of the reports of his travels in southern Italy from 1874 to 1876 (Franchetti, 1875; Franchetti & Sonnino, 1877). For reasons unknown, but in all likelihood related to his frustrated expectations for settler colonialism and disappointment with the outcomes, the notes were left on the shelf, never becoming memoirs.

Besides the notebooks, there is also an epistolary corpus mostly composed of letters addressed to Franchetti and a few draft letters written and kept by Franchetti himself, ranging from the late 1880s–1917, the year of his death. Still, gaps are evident both in what he neglected to cover and the lack of documents arising from his duties. One may wonder why only slightly more than 110 letters of this personal correspondence have been preserved; for instance, the letters to his wife Alice Hallgarten—where historians might expect to find more personal or even intimate information, such as moments of fatigue, hopes and disappointments in relation to the colonial endeavors—are not there. It is noteworthy that the largest group of official communication that can be read in the three registers, are copies made in duplicate of the letters exchanged with the colonial authorities in Eritrea and metropolitan Rome, from 1891 to 1895. The network of Franchetti's correspondents can be useful in order to investigate some minor historical personalities of secondary importance once the shaky orthography is deciphered.

It is well known that colonialism was far from being merely a violent form of domination but constituted also a form of hegemonic epistemology. Following Pierre Bourdieu's research on symbolic violence, the study of epistemic violence has been at the core of the process of othering marginalized groups by Gayatri Spivak (1988) and other scholars (*inter alia* Dotson, 2011) who clarified the need to analyze classifications of epistemic violence through their application in empirical settings. Anthropologist Ann Laura Stoler (2009), together with archival scholars (*inter alia* Bastian, 2006), pioneered the trend from archives-as-sources to archives-as-subject. She demonstrated how to deal with this typology of sources, refraining from digging into colonial records to represent the master narrative of the former rulers without reflection on the oppressed and voiceless. Archives per se have been put at the heart of a renewed interest that has inspired researchers to rewrite archival history (Caswell et al., 2017; Cox, 2019), hinging upon basic epistemological questions about the nature of sources and their potential to communicate the past, fostering the late twentieth century "archival turn" (Ketelaar, 2017; Namhila, 2016).

While the historiography of empire has found a new life, paving the way for a "new imperial history", settler studies have also started to become prominent (Joël, 2018; Veracini, 2010). On the whole, since the archival turn there has been a greater

engagement with “archives as cultural artifacts of fact production, of taxonomies in the making, and of disparate notions of what made up colonial authority” (Stoler, 2002: 85). Even if sometimes attracting less attention, unofficial archival collections made available to researchers have become part of the archival turn (Kirsch & Rohan, 2008). There are several archives of Italian political personalities and state officials who worked overseas that are scattered throughout the peninsula, for example Carlo Conti Rossini, Alberto Pollera, Giovanni Battista Ellero, Antonio Gandolfi, Pèleo Bacci, Vittorio Piola Caselli, Salvago Raggi, to name just a few who were part of the colonial machine in Eritrea. Reference to which may enhance the understanding of the public administrations in which they served, as well as of the colonial views and practices at the time. This is definitely the case with Franchetti’s papers, which falls in line with Burke’s (1997: 1) definition: “[p]ersonal papers are subjective, idiosyncratic, emotional, contemporary and narrow by focus”. These colonial records are interesting also because they are part of a slightly different type of source than those of the so-called “officer-scholars”, as Gianni Dore (2017) labeled the Italian men on the spot who worked for the colonial administration while gathering data for their own research (Dore et al., 2013: part II and III; Zaccaria, 2009).

Colonial archives have to be scrutinized as powerful “technologies of rule” aimed at controlling colonial subjects (Stoler, 2002: 87), and extracting information and voices of the subjugated that had been silenced in what Bellamy and Shetty (2000: 27) aptly labeled as the “palimpsestic narrative of imperialism”. Subaltern and post-colonial discourse have already drawn attention to the possibilities of discovering the voices of the “other”, the “colonized”, through the cracks and silences in colonial records. When it comes to historiography and methods in African history, it is a long-since clarified and evident fact that colonial archives, as storehouses of public documents, are far from being the epitome of reliability as they reproduce hegemonic whiteness. Scholars have gone far beyond the dominating centrality of written sources and material records. Interdisciplinarity (Bates et al., 1993; Falola & Jennings, 2002) has become the key factor when other branches of the humanities such as archeology, anthropology, sociology, gender studies, linguistics, and oral history contribute to grasp what Toyin Falola (2017: 703) broadly defines “ritual archives”. Poststructuralist critique raised the awareness of archival power as “hegemonic gatekeepers to the past” (Lustig, 2020: 69), and the issue of knowledge production “within historically determined as well as ongoing asymmetrical relations of power” (Arowosegbe, 2016: 324) has turned the spotlight on the critiques of eurocentrism. The semiotician Walter Mignolo (2017: 42; but also Mignolo & Walsh, 2018) and decolonial theorist Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018, 2021) draw attention to the need of decolonizing Western epistemology, coupled by those who share this historically-informed decolonial sensibility, arguing for the “decolonial archival turn” (Crawford et al., 2021; Ghaddar & Caswell, 2019).

While some scholars, aware of these epistemological considerations, tend to steer clear of colonial archives, as they fear getting trapped in colonial biased categories, others went on, considering exploring the relationships between archives, knowledge and power as worthwhile (Huang & Weaver-Hightower, 2019; Reid & Paisley, 2017). As Lustig (2020: 69–70) aptly stress: “[f]or even if scholars no longer view archives

as repositories of unvarnished historical truth, they have not lost their epistemic value. Instead, they have gained new layers of meaning which must be peeled back to understand how and why archives remain important for historians, archivists, and the public". Far from fetishizing archival sources, historian Joël Glasman (2016: 414) uses the metaphor of "the baby being thrown out with the bathwater", warning that dismissing colonial sources all together would lead to reject not only colonial categories, but the very same tools of historical research. Every historical source is problematic, what matters is acknowledging its shortcomings with integrity and respect mostly of the subalterns who bore the brunt of imperial rule, and distinguishing the different levels of contextual analysis.

Although they are no longer sufficient, colonial archives are still crucial and, despite the rather limited and one-dimensional view of provenance (Bastian, 2013), personal records like Franchetti's are relevant because they can open a window on Italian colonial imperialism. These records support us in the effort to shed light on the colonial past, to continue to learn from and about the colonial period, giving voice to those who suffered under colonial rule. In the case of Franchetti's colonial papers, the suggestion is using a constructive attitude to, and critical engagement with, these sources through a reading strategy concerned with the cross-cultural encounters and material practices in which colonial knowledge is embedded. Colonial accounts may be considered as an encounter between Europeans and Africans (Roque & Wagner, 2012), thus providing the opportunity to study historical encounters in which both observer and observed played a part.

Indeed, what happened with Franchetti's colonial records seems the opposite of what Farge (2013: 62–63) describes when talking about a new "archive" being taken into consideration by historians, when "a new form of knowledge takes shape". The idea is not considering these sources as a valuable corrective to earlier historical interpretations, but as an additional (re)source for a more careful reconstruction of Italian imperialism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Actually, any archive can be regarded as "a knowledge event" (Aljoe et al., 2015: 259), and in this case study the Franchetti colonial collection may represent a tile of the "colonial library" (Mudimbe, 1988, 1994) referring to the body of texts and epistemological order which constructed Africa as a symbol of otherness and inferiority.

The archive itself is unable to offer direct access to the past, any reading of its contents is necessarily a reinterpretation. No source speaks for itself. Thus, interpretations are determined by the research questions asked by historians. An archival encounter is suitable to bring into being not a mere reproduction of facts but a richly documented and rigorously analytical history. I was not expecting these sources could uncover hitherto unknown events about the colonial dynamics of planning settler societies. My initial intent was to produce a learned critical edition of the manuscripts. I was struggling with Franchetti's handwriting, which is hard to read. His calligraphy, sadly for the readers, often tends to become undecipherable, especially when the notes were written hurriedly in pencil. Additional comments in the margin, and underlining in pencil and red pen can also be analyzed as modes of expression. I realized that the Istituto per l'Oriente Carlo Alfonso Nallino compiled an inventory which was far from detailed in Italian, the language of the former

colonizer, which might be a barrier to dissemination. This is an aspect of almost every research endeavor that is familiar to scholars: things rarely go as planned. I not only had to rethink my subject, from a critical edition to a monograph, but had to carve out the time to reorient the project, carrying out many months of further research in other archives and consulting a huge body of historiography, and writing. Like many research projects, it was continuously evolving. Not only did the inventory need critical editing, as omissions and failings in transcriptions are recurrent, lacking the most basic tools of the historian's craft, such as a philological approach to the text, for place names, and textual criticism, to name just two. I went into Franchetti's archival collection with a set of questions in relation the government's policy on natives, however it subsequently turned out to be unfeasible on its own because of insufficient material. Supplementary research providing additional layers of contextualization was needed, using a wide array of documents, such as official government documents, private papers, diaries, memoirs, and popular periodicals, combining content and discourse analysis with historical methodology, I decided which fragments of the records to weave together.

Below are some possible reading strategies of Franchetti's textual sources, starting from a reading along the grain of the manuscripts, which describes the state of affairs in the colonial contexts. The link between archival word and thought process is important. Reading along the grain, recognizing coloniality of thinking, is required before reading against the grain, searching for archive's silences. These records allow the exploration of strategies and visions adopted by Italian officials and local intermediaries toward land tenure, and to identify significant patterns and themes that emerge through analysis. Clues in the records emerged about colonial power structures and mindsets, understood as a hierarchical system imposing normative values, which excluded and discriminated, besides testifying to how Franchetti performed his task with alacrity, and his commitment to settler colonialism in Eritrea, Benadir, and Tripolitania. Franchetti visited all these African countries, identifying certain limited baseline similarities as well as huge differences, and tried to provide a deeper contextual analysis of how different policies could engage in land tenure. While his experience in each country pivoted over a fairly short period (except for Eritrea), in total it spanned almost three decades. It is well known that records and library material are interrelated. Regrettably, the library of Franchetti—with all his volumes, periodicals, miscellaneous papers and pamphlets—has been dismembered. Only a part of it is preserved by the Fondazione Hallgarten-Franchetti Centro Studi Villa Montesca, located in the manor house of the policy maker in the municipality of Città di Castello, and gives little support for the research on settler colonialism.

The position of the narrator, the metaphors and other rhetorical devices, are key features for analyzing Franchetti's texts, and are to be taken into proper consideration, following the agreement among historians on the need to adopt a deconstructionist approach when analyzing these kinds of diary entries (Cottam, 2001: 268; Wodak & Meyer, 2003). These colonial manuscripts are interesting sources for historians providing subjective testimony of individual value judgements and collective everyday life experiences in the colonies. Researchers may be interested in the information these notes provide, which covers a broad range of subjects including

contemporary livelihoods, African people's attitudes, travel itineraries, countless descriptions of nature, the weather, the hydroclimate and staple crops patterns across the colonies, reports on Franchetti's excursions, and isolated events. Despite being at times repetitive and mundane, they provide new historical insights into the early approach to Italian settler colonialism. These notebooks contribute considerably to our understanding of the fragilities, ambiguities, and contradictions of this period.

Franchetti did not escape the teleological thinking inherent in Western social science, which imbued his eurocentric bias. This stands out in his vocabulary of prejudice that relied on the binary distinction between "us" and "them", the latter being the African subjects portrayed and characterized according to colonial tropes. However, in his effort to capture local understandings of the region, and local techniques of agricultural production, the reader may assess how far he was able to look at local societies with inquisitiveness, striving for indigenous knowledge in order to pick up examples of good practice from a bottom-up perspective to use them in his settler colonial project. These sources resist the "logic of elimination" which sustain theoretical assertions of settler colonial studies, and are interesting for insights on agricultural production and trading activities between and across empires.

Irma Taddia (1986) and other scholars highlighted that land tenure in Eritrea was grounded in a relationality that emphasizes the interdependence of people, ecosystems, and economies. Land, law, and sovereignty, were interwoven based on a radically different epistemology than that of the colonial state. The dynamic of a "co-creative relationship", whereby local lands and local people became extensions of each other was threatened when settler colonial logic claiming possession over land encroached on local modes of land governance. The understanding of Franchetti as an observer of land tenure systems was limited, because he acted as an interfering agent and incompetently imposed his views on the spot. From the records, we may reassess why Franchetti's effort proved to be insufficiently planned, competing with local authority and its powerbrokers.

These records provide nuance to the story of settler colonialism and the most suitable ways of promoting it. The main protagonists, in Rome, Asmara and in the experimental stations in Eritrea, as well as in Benadir and Tripolitania, had different outlooks and agendas that highlight how the individual protagonists interpreted the agenda to suit their own interests. One of the sub-themes that emerges from the records, is how frequently individuals talked up land tenure projects to secure a posting for themselves. As a result, the roles of individuals in land policies are evident.⁴ Reflecting the contradictory and often divergent interests and agendas not only of the colonial authorities and the populations they ruled, but of the very same colonial officers, the records confirm the need to pay attention to the dynamics of power between the various colonial actors, and to the power of early indigenous interlocutors.

⁴ One example among the colonial officers is the case of Captain Pietro Zanardi. From the papers, his determination to use Franchetti's project in Eritrea to advance his career is clear. He was eventually appointed head of the Agriculture and Colonization Office by Governor Oreste Baratieri in September 1894. Once appointed, he did not hesitate to renege on the previously asserted beliefs and to place exclusive responsibility for the failure of the settler colonialism experiment on Franchetti.

It is easy to unravel the relationship between Franchetti and the military rulers of the colonies, and the exchange of ideas between the staff and associates of the experimental colonial settlements. Through an examination of the archive's contents, one perceives the ebb and flow of daily life in the office: working relationships develop and shift, and the balance of power changes over time. Franchetti considered that the military should no longer be allowed to misgovern the African colonies. He firmly believed that his plans would have been the best alternative for the local people, or the least worst option. Needless to say, there was a lot of self-deception in his arguments, but it can be ascertained that Franchetti started his job in Eritrea not fully trusted either by the governor Antonio Gandolfi (Bruner, 2009) nor his successor Oreste Baratieri, and was universally distrusted by the military. The clash of vision with Franchetti resulted in bitter tensions (Rainero, 1972).

Reading the same texts against the grain, researchers may try to obtain more information about processes of negotiation, and entanglements between colonial officers and various actors, like notables and intermediaries. Counter-readings bring to the surface names, and only occasionally the voices, of the colonized: enslaved people, servants, interpreters, peasants, and different social groups. They allow us to glean details of the lives of laborers recruited locally, consisting mainly of temporary-hired staff. The aim is to shed light not only on the role that marginalized subjects played, but also on the type of interaction that took place in each of the three colonies, in terms of resistance, co-optation, and negotiation (Negash, 1986, 1987). Taking Franchetti's records as point of departure, the role played by intermediaries to influence outcomes should not be over-emphasized. What is meaningful, as Rosaldo (1986: 79) argues, is "the fact that a source is not 'objective' does not mean that it is unusable". In colonial records, local indigenous knowledge is usually not inscribed by locals but by the colonizers. But settler colonialism intervention demanded its own forms of knowledge, produced first through problematization, and then by a set of practices, where those acting as intermediaries communicated information, techniques, and specimens. Thanks to their practical expertise, they also became sources of new colonial knowledge in their own right. Care is required in applying generalizations, but it is possible to say that Franchetti's papers contribute to deepening historical awareness of the transitional phase from the Turko-Egyptian officials (D'Avray, 1996) to the Italian administration. This is an interesting point, as the legacies of former Egyptian rule still lingered, more significantly than scholarly literature has recognized. A meticulous analysis of these records can throw light on the dynamic interaction of colonial discourse and individual agency. The interface with the colonized was of different kind, depending on the colonial contexts. In Eritrea, Franchetti experienced environmental and human landscapes ravaged by a devastating famine, rinderpest, disease, and violence (Pankhurst & Johnson, 1988; Serels, 2018: 90–9; Taddia, 2013), where alliances were shifting and harsh poverty and starvation hampered the farmers' ability to adapt to stress by developing coping strategies. In these disrupted realities, Franchetti met people in distress, and slavery (Serels, 2019). This is one perspective that might be retrieved through an "against the grain" reading of these colonial manuscripts. Franchetti met groups of people engaged in the slave trade.

He described them in detail, including victims kidnapped *en route* and taken to the Eritrean coast to be sold.

Nineteenth century views on female roles, are also visible in Franchetti's papers reflecting the gender data gap, with a notable exception contained in a fragment about one episode of interracial sexual relations (Barrera, 1996). The files provide details of a female figure who took an active interest in politics, mocking the colonial settlers. Even among post-colonial scholars, there is no consensus regarding the methodology to recover the voices of the oppressed colonial subjects. Colonial data, heavily biased toward men, are likely to misrepresent female needs and roles. Franchetti's colonial records captured an example of the possibility to elucidate the agency of subaltern women, together with the diversity of various visions of concubinage. This is a useful perspective if we are to understand the ambiguities of discourse on colonial subjecthood.

What did Franchetti's settler colonialism plans achieve? In terms of implemented policies, little to nothing. The Italian government officially dismissed his ideas as expensive and bound to incite local tensions. In terms of influence on the colonial discourse, interpretations differ greatly. While scholars have for long tended to underestimate Franchetti's role (Labanca, 1993: 150–7; Rogari, 2020), more recently, within the realm of post-colonial studies, some scholars debating the biopolitics of colonial Italy (Welch, 2016; Wong, 2006; but also Ertola, 2022: 57–70) run the risk of overemphasizing his role (Guazzini, 2020). Even from such a schematic reporting, it is quite clear that these sources may be used for the reconstruction of political, social, and economic history of the early Italian colonies in Africa.

Within the broad debates about decolonizing archives and archiving, one further observation by way of conclusion. It is critically important that all primary sources related to Italian colonialism must be made available for the interested people based in the former colonies. The pilot project *Returning and Sharing Memories: Toward a Joint Study of the Ethio-Italian Common Past* (Bertella, 2013) focused on colonial private archives located in Italy, and was an encouraging sign of hope that such bilateral cooperation is indeed possible and can occur. Efforts should therefore continue in this direction combining a humanistic orientation, focused on the social functions of archives and processes of digitalization (Agostinho, 2019), moving beyond the first attempts frustrated by prohibitive costs (Breckenridge, 2014), to preserve, protect, and make accessible repositories holding valuable archival materials relevant to African societies, thus promoting decoloniality. This is in tune with *The Memory of the World* program of UNESCO,⁵ which encourages making digitized copies available through the net. Considering decolonization as an ongoing process, one can only agree with Jeurgens and Karabinos (2020: 200) who promote the view of “digitized archives as instruments, as sources, to facilitate and contribute to justice, ethical atonement and maybe in some respects even to facilitate decolonization”.

⁵ UNESCO Memory of the World, *Programme Objectives*, <https://en.unesco.org/programme/mow> (last accessed on 23 October 2023).

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The “Reaction from Below”: Colonial Archives, Communist Propaganda and Messianic Movements in French Equatorial Africa



Bianca Maria Carcangiu

Abstract The aim of this essay is to re-analyse the archival material used by the author in the 1980s and 1990s in preparation for the publication of a book entitled *L’Africa equatoriale francese fra colonialismo e fermenti rivoluzionari*. The main objective was to study the reaction of the colonised to the intention of transforming African societies according to the vision of the European colonial powers. In terms of a general methodological plan, the first fundamental consideration is that the *reaction from below* in Africa has long been neglected. The historian’s task is therefore to bring the masses under the colonial yoke out of their silence. A critical analysis of the *archival document* shows that for every repressive action of the coloniser, there is a reaction of the colonised. Therefore, we make a critical study of a written and an unwritten but inferable voice. So we let the archives, the documents, speak. Of course, there are, were and will be limits, because the colonised speak through words often transcribed by the colonisers, unless other historiographical sources are discovered.

Keywords Equatorial French Africa · French colonial archives · Anti-colonial and revolutionary movements · Communist propaganda · Messianic movements

Introduction

The study of colonial archives has been an important component of African studies and scholarly research, especially for the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries. They are a direct product of the European colonial project and offer a partial but fundamental picture of the relation between the colonial power and colonised Africans. Their use is, as we will discuss in this chapter, a fundamental component of the study of African history, not only for what archival documents openly say, but also for those stories and voices that can be indirectly found in those documents.

B. M. Carcangiu (✉)
University of Cagliari, Cagliari, Italy
e-mail: bcarcang@unica.it

In this chapter, I present and critically discuss the archival research that I carried out in the 1980s and 1990s, which led to the publication of my book *L'Africa equatoriale francese fra colonialismo e fermenti rivoluzionari* (Carcangiu, 2002). With that research, my main aim was to investigate the reaction of colonised peoples (the *reaction from below*: that is, from subalterns) in French Equatorial Africa to the European attempt to transform African societies according to their vision and intentions. A topic that received a lot of attention from historians, including African scholars, who have contributed tremendously in fostering a broader and more fruitful debate and in refining the methodological tools of the historical research.¹ It is important to point out here that many of the administrative sources to study the history of Africa during the colonial period are located outside Africa in the capitals of European former colonisers. For this reason, African researchers had—and still have—to leave their countries in order to consult these documents. Despite being crucial in the process of post-independence nation-building, there was no mention of these archives in the negotiations leading to independence, and “people only began to account for the problem after independence. At that time, the dual value of the archives—as a management tool and a cultural asset—emerged forcefully” (Barrera, 2013: 18). In fact, when an independent state took over the reins of self-government, “it found itself having to deal with issues concerning the rebuilding of its cultural identity that were no less urgent than those of managing the administration of the new state, for which the mastery of both past and current archives turned out to be indispensable” (Mozzati, 1989: 214).

The colonial powers, on their part, were aware of the risks connected to leaving this important cultural heritage in their former colonies. Thus, when they handed over their possessions in Africa, they decided to not leave behind them any materials that could embarrass them and their administrations (Barrera, 2013: 19). Specific instructions were therefore issued by the governments of the former colonial powers to their officials in the colonies regarding those documents that were considered as sensitive. This was particularly the case of the territories under British domination, including the former Italian colonies in East Africa that after WWII were put under the control of the British military administration. Thus, on the eve of independence, large numbers of documents that had been stored in African countries were moved to European capitals and became part of European national archives. Many African governments worked hard to locate and retrieve these documents, but with little success. They became known as *migrated archives*.

What are these *migrated archives*? According to the Society of American Archivists' (2005) *Glossary of Archival and Records Terminology*, *migrated archives* are “the archives of a country that have moved from the country where they were originally accumulated; removed archives” (Badger, 2012; Mnjama, 2015: 46). According to some scholars, they are “archives in exile or archives unjustly transferred (removed) from one country to another” (Mnjama, 2015: 45–6). Whatever the definition, they are not in the place where they should be kept. The interest of African nations in

¹ For further reflections on related topics, see the proceedings of a conference held in Cagliari on 18–19 April 1991 (Carcangiu 1993).

their colonial archives has solid foundations, as they are an essential part of a nation's historical and cultural heritage, and therefore of the foundation of a national identity, while “also serving as a basic source of evidence needed to assert the rights of individual citizens”, looking for historical truth and continuity. As Nathan Mnjama (*ibidem*) points out, “[m]ilitary and colonial occupation should grant no particular right to retain records acquired by virtue of such occupation”.²

The African states' perseverance in asking for the return of documents and archives reveals their awareness of the power of the archive. As Léopold Sédar Senghor puts it “the condition of new countries, of countries that have recently come to be a full part of the modern world, means that we need to have good, well-ordered and efficient archives” (Mozzati, 1989: 214). The Senegalese president was correct, as the past is controlled through archives. They represent “enormous power over memory and identity, over the fundamental ways in which society seeks evidence of what its core values are and have been, where it has come from, and where it is going. Archives, then, are not passive storehouses of old stuff, but active sites where social power is negotiated, contested, confirmed” (Schwartz & Cook, 2002: 1). The archives were set up by powerful colonial states to strengthen their control on the colonised societies. When the archive becomes in itself a subject of study we clearly see how some stories and perspectives are privileged, while other are marginalised (Stoler, 2002). The issue of power relations and hierarchies is therefore critical when we approach the archive. “As scholars [...] increasingly discover and focus upon context, it is essential to reconsider the relationship between archives and the societies that create and use them. At the heart of that relationship is power. Yet power—power to make records of certain events and ideas and not of others [...] power over individual rights and freedoms, over collective memory and national identity [...] is a concept largely absent from the traditional archival perspective”. (Schwartz & Cook, 2002: 5). Archives are not to be used without asking questions on how to interpret their contents “[b]y treating records and archives as contested sites of power, we can bring new sensibilities to understanding records and archives as dynamic technologies of rule which actually *create* the histories and social realities they ostensibly only *describe*” (*ibidem*: 7).³

Pioneering in the field have been the studies by Ann Laura Stoler (2002, 2009), who urged historians to consult colonial archives not as summaries of knowledge but as productions of knowledge (from *archive-as-source* to *archive-as-subject*), and to

² The issue was so deeply felt that within the International Council on Archives, a non-governmental organisation dedicated to everything that revolves around archives around the world, there were three organisations relating to the African continent: the Eastern and Southern African Regional Branch of the International Council of Archives (ESARBICA), the most active of all (it should be noted that Somalia is not part of this organisation, despite the efforts that have been made to include it, and it is the only country in the region without functioning national archives); the West African Regional Branch of the International Council on Archives (WARBICA); and the Central African Regional Branch of the Internal Council on Archives (CENARBICA). The main reasons for the success of ESARBICA, according to Nathan Mnjama, are the common language of the participating countries, English, and the long periods of political stability compared with the other states. See Mnjama (2007: 23–24).

³ Emphasis in the original.

look at archives “as epistemological experiments rather than as sources, to colonial archives as cross-sections of contested knowledge [...] to colonial archives as both transparencies on which power relations were inscribed and intricate technologies of rule in themselves. Its concerns are two: to situate new approaches to colonial archives within the broader ‘historic turn’ of the last two decades and to suggest what critical histories of the colonial have to gain by turning further towards a politics of knowledge that reckons with archival genres, cultures of documentation, fictions of access, and archival conventions” (Stoler, 2002: 87–8). Drawing inspiration from these studies, this chapter focuses on my personal experience with archival research in the Archives Nationales d’Outre-Mer in Marseille.

French Colonial Archives and Communist Activities in FEA

The Archives d’Outre-Mer repository was built in Aix-en-Provence. It first opened its doors to the public in 1966. At the time, it already housed the repatriated archives of the former colonies and Algeria. Later on, in 1986, the archives of the Ministry of the Colonies, which had been located on Rue Oudinot in Paris since 1910, were moved to the Archives d’Outre-Mer; this was another important step in their development. By 1995, the Aix-en-Provence archives (now known as the Archives Nationales d’Outre-Mer de Aix-en-Provence—ANOM) is the archive that collects the largest amount of documents on the history of the French colonial empire.⁴ I walked for the first time through the doors of the archives in 1972. There were three, or at most five, people there at the time. By the 1990s, a reservation was required to visit the archives.

At the time of independence, the archives of those administrative branches that had sovereign functions were repatriated. These included sources from governors, residents, prefectures, the police, consular offices and French personnel files. The documents connected to the management of the colonies—concerning health, public works, teaching, finance, and economic services—were left in Africa. The archives of French Equatorial Africa (FEA) migrated to Aix in 1960, while the archives of the old General Government of French West Africa (FWA) remained in Dakar.⁵ During my research on FEA, I consulted the original documents in Aix and I believe that I viewed all those that were available in the archives at the time.

From a methodological point of view, an initial fundamental observation is that the *reaction from below* in Africa was largely neglected during the colonial period, because it was believed to be non-existent. Later, after the development of the field of African history in the 1960s, the topic became increasingly central in African

⁴ Archives Nationales d’Outre Mer, <http://www.archivesnationales.culture.gouv.fr/anom/fr> (last accessed on 17 October 2023).

⁵ Some of the FWA sources were microfilmed between 1961 and 2005. A bilateral cooperation agreement between the Directorates of the Archives of France and the Archives of Senegal was signed on 4 July 2013. The archives were registered in 1997 by Senegal in the “Mémoire du Monde”. Archives Nationales d’Outre Mer (Aix-en-Provence). Project scientifique, culturel et éducatif. PSCE 2020–2024, République Française, online. December 20, 2020.

studies. As the first generation of historians of Africa, we begun to read the archival documentation in order to identify the voices and actions of the colonised communities. Our target became to *give a voice* to the masses who lived under colonial rule. Even if it is true that “as far as Africa in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is concerned, we have few written materials of a local African nature and origin to work with” (Taddia, 1996: 17), by analysing the archival documents critically, we can detect and reconstruct the reaction of the colonised to the repressive actions of the colonisers. Thus, a critical investigation of the sources can reveal written and unwritten, but still detectable, voices.

While working in the French archives as part of a study on messianic movements—a crucial topic for identifying the origins of political and social changes in sub-Saharan Africa —, I realised that there was a need to carry out a more in-depth examination of the abundant materials on revolutionary communist propaganda in French Equatorial Africa, at least for the timeframe which consultation was at the time permitted, i.e. the 1940s.⁶ This was an important period that could highlight both the social, economic and political upheaval caused by the French administration (including the abuses by the concessionary companies) (Coquery Vidrovitch, 1985; 1972; 1969), and the strategy of the Third International (which had been active since 1919), which was broadly supported by the activities of the French Communist Party (Collotti Pischel & Robertazzi, 1968; Hargreaves, 1993).⁷

The large amount of material on revolutionary propaganda in FEA is due to the constitution of the *Contrôle et Assistance aux Indigènes* (CAI). It was created in the French colonies when—following the creation of the Third International and its anti-colonial activities in the colonies—it was decided to set up a special organisation that would be able to provide information on the activities of the Comintern, whose basic objectives were a call for national self-determination and a declared policy of radical aid to national independence movements in colonial territories. In 1925, the CAI was transferred as a special section to the First Division of the Ministry of Colonies, the department in charge of political affairs. Its actions were relentless and decisive, in part also thanks to the full support and cooperation it enjoyed from scholars who were experts on the African colonies, including of their languages. The CAI provided secret information not only on the political activities of residents from the colonies in France, but also on everything related to the “communist threat” to French colonial policy produced by other ministries. The CAI was also in contact with other government and military institutions, so that it would be able to collect as much information as possible on the strategies employed by the Bolsheviks throughout the world. Behind the CAI’s reports, there was a network of organisations, information, and closely intertwined relationships. From 1939, however, its activity was limited to carrying out research on individuals and issuing identity cards during the war to allow people from the colonies and foreigners to circulate in the metropolis. It was then renamed *Service de Liaison avec les Originaires des Territoires Français*

⁶ The research was promoted by the then Istituto di Studi Africani e Orientali in Cagliari.

⁷ Communist International (1934) *Thèses, manifestes et résolutions par les Ier, IIe, IIIe et IVe Congrès de l’Internationale Communiste (1919–1923)*, Librairie du Travail, Paris.

d’Outre-Mer (SLOTFOM) by a decree dated 28 February 1946 (O’Melia, 1980: 91). In 1952, it was linked to the Overseas Social Affairs Department. The archives of this Department, which contained information on the political activities of “indigenous” people that was collected simultaneously by the General Security and the Directorate of Political Affairs in the colonies, are a very important source on the history of nationalist and communist movements overseas, not only in Indochina, but also in all the territories of the French colonial empire.

The CAI compiled a secret monthly report for the Ministry of the Colonies that was to be sent to government officials at the highest levels. The title was always the same: *Notes sur la propagande révolutionnaire intéressant les pays d’outre-mer*.⁸ The report was divided into four main sections: communism in France; communist activities in France concerning the colonies; communist activities in the colonies; and foreign interference or colonial intervention. The primary goal was to keep the highest authorities informed on the revolutionary propaganda of the Comintern and the French Communist Party so that the necessary remedies could be implemented as rapidly as possible. Information was key and nothing was to be discarded; everything had to be observed and analysed. The CAI had its headquarters in Paris, but it soon became necessary to open a branch in Marseille, the international port from which most communist and anti-colonial propaganda publications and leaflets were delivered to the French territories in Africa and the Near and Far East.

Between 1920 and 1930, in order to obtain detailed information on anti-colonial activities, the CAI used various agents. In order to infiltrate the Colonial Section, the Intercolonial Union and other groups from the colonies, recruited a large number of informants from among the immigrant population.⁹ This practice aroused great suspicion among this people, and created a constant source of break-ups and mutual accusations, which in some ways undermined the unity of the movements. Within the CAI, a sort of ranking was drawn up of groups from whom informants could be co-opted: in the first place chiefs or civil leaders; then religious leaders; landlords and hoteliers; and major colonial military figures. The code name of one of the most famous among these informants was “Desiré”. His reports are precise and accurate, and I have studied several of them (O’Melia, 1980).¹⁰

⁸ ANOM, Afrique Équatoriale Française [hereafter AEF] 5 D 113, Notes du Ministère sur la propagande révolutionnaire communiste intéressant les pays d’outre-mer, 31 décembre; ANOM SLOTFOM, Le Président du Conseil Ministre de l’Intérieur Direction de la Surêté Générale à Monsieur le Ministre des Colonies, Paris, 28 avril 1931. La propagande communiste dans les colonies, Paris, le 27 mars 1931. Serie XIII, Carton 3; ANOM AEF 5 D 113, Notes du Ministère sur la propagande révolutionnaire communiste intéressant les pays d’outre-mer, Paris, le 30 septembre 1932. See also the dossiers contained in ANOM AEF, 5 D 54; ANOM AEF, 5 D 62; ANOM AEF, 5 D 65; ANOM AEF, 5 D 68; ANOM AEF, 5 D 70.

⁹ People that moved to France from the colonies and were recruited as labour force, particularly in Marseille.

¹⁰ ANOM SLOTFOM Série V, Carton 10, Rapport de l’agent Désiré, 1e decembre 1928; ANOM SLOTFOM Série V, Carton 3, Note de l’agent Deésiré, le 11 aout 1927; ANOM SLOTFOM, Série III, Carton 17, Rapport de l’Agent Coco, 13 aout, 1929. See, besides the archival documents, O’Melia (1980).

In addition to the very valuable CAI reports, the restrictive and severe measures taken by the French administration to halt the revolutionary wave that was about to spread across Africa are undoubtedly useful to investigate the presence of a *reaction from below* in French Equatorial Africa. Among these measures, the most rigid concerned the control of the press by the Ministry of the Colonies, the regime to be applied in French ports to ships flying the flag of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and the issuing of decrees for foreigners wishing to enter France and the African colonies.¹¹ The restrictions relating to the control of the press are amply confirmed in the documentation on the link between Indochinese and Africans living in Marseille. The place in Marseille where the people from the colonies converged was the International Sailors' Club where, at the end of meetings, packets containing newspapers or tracts intended clandestinely for the colonial territories were exchanged, as it is clear from the reports prepared by undercover agents, which include full details on meetings and occasional encounters. In fact, in French territories, Africans were heavily influenced by Annamites,¹² who pushed them to reject any form of colonialism. Their meetings were mostly inspired by communism and the principles of the Third International.¹³

One of the first decrees relating to the press regime in French Equatorial Africa dates back to 30 September 1921.¹⁴ It is the expression of an almost total prohibition of freedom of press and movement. Article 4 is striking: it states that the publication of any newspaper or periodical written in Arabic, in any of the indigenous languages in use in the colonies or in a foreign language was prohibited. Article 5 states that "[a]ny instigation of indigenous people to revolt against the French authorities" committed with the help of the distribution of various printed materials would be strictly punished according to the law. Between 1934 and 1940, more decrees were issued that aimed at repressing any form of resistance to the French authorities, leading activists in the colonies and "subversive foreigners" to operate underground.¹⁵ By a decree-law dated 29 July 1939, the foreign press in the colonies that fell under the Ministry of the Colonies was brought under control.¹⁶ From Paris to Brazzaville in Middle Congo, the Governor-General of French Equatorial Africa, Soloniac, signed a six article-long decree on 1 September 1939 to give a consistent character to what was now openly called censorship.¹⁷

¹¹ ANOM AEF, 5 D 150, Régime de la presse en AEF législation générale, Saisies, 1934–1958.

¹² The French Administration used the term "Annamites" referring to the people living in part of today's Vietnam (the former Annam kingdom).

¹³ ANOM SLOTFOM, Série III, Carton 20, Dossier 4, Le délégué du service de contrôle et d'assistance en France des indigènes à Monsieur le Directeur des Affaires Politiques, Ministère des Colonies, Marseille, le 20 février 1930, Liaison entre Indochinois et Africains résidant à Marseille; ANOM SLOTFOM, Série V, carton 3, Rapport de l'Agent Paul, 21 décembre 1929.

¹⁴ ANOM AEF, 5 D 150, Régime de la presse en AEF, Législation générale, Saisies, 1934–1958.

¹⁵ ANOM AEF, 5 D 150, Décret du 12 septembre 1939 relatif au contrôle de la presse et des publications.

¹⁶ ANOM AEF, 5 D 150, Décret du 29 juillet 1939 relative au contrôle de la presse étrangère dans les colonies relevant du Ministère des colonies.

¹⁷ ANOM AEF, 5 D 150, Régime de la presse en AEF, Législation générale, Saisies, 1934–1958.

In 1931, the then-governor Maurice Alfassa promoted another measure to control the propaganda in the African territories even further: the monthly publication of an information bulletin on FEA (*Bulletin de renseignements de l'AEF*) in order to have a constantly updated information service. In this way, the Ministry of the Colonies would always be informed in a timely manner on revolutionary propaganda and indigenous people who were manifesting revolutionary ideas. It was therefore a service that was born in the colonies and implemented for the colonial territories.¹⁸ As a result, a continuous exchange of information and suspicions ensued between the CAI and the Ministry of the Colonies, between the CAI and the Governors of the two African Federations and between the Ministry of the Colonies and the Governors.

Finally, in the archives it is possible to find and read the reports on the activities of Catholic, and later Protestant, missionaries in the French colonies. In French Equatorial Africa, both Catholics from France and American Protestants were active, their missions being located in Gabon and Ubangi Chari (now the Central African Republic). In Middle Congo (now the Republic of Congo, also known as Congo Brazzaville) were operating two Swedish missionary societies. One was the evangelist Svenska Missions Forbundet, which was based in Stockholm, and had been established in Brazzaville since June 1911. It had missions in Kolo, Sibiti, Mouyandzi, Musana and Madzia. The other one was the Baptist Orebro Missions Forenning, which had established its headquarters in the Sangha valley (Central Africa River, a tributary of the Congo) in 1921. School teaching and evangelisations based on a free interpretation of the Bible were the cornerstones of the activities of the Swedish missionaries. Initially, French colonial authorities, showed a certain mistrust towards them and later they openly condemned them. Nonetheless, they were held back from the international agreements that regulated evangelisation issues, which allowed the missionaries extensive freedom to do their religious work, limited only by the need for security and public order. The importance attributed from the French colonial administration to the work of evangelisation favoured the spread of a certain confidence and ease among the missionaries, who were more or less consciously inclined to address both religious and political issues.¹⁹

The Reaction from Below in French Equatorial Africa

By navigating this great mass of documents and reports compiled by colonial officials, comparing them with each other, minutely examining all the actions taken by the colonial administration to crush even the slightest reaction by its subjects and the dreaded revolutionary propaganda of the Third International, and carefully reviewing

¹⁸ ANOM AEF, 5 D 54, Le Gouverneur Général p.i. de l'Afrique Équatoriale Française à Monsieur le Ministre des Colonies, Direction des Affaires Politiques, Paris, Secret, Brazzaville, le 4 novembre 1931.

¹⁹ ANOM Sous-série 4(2), D 26. Rapports Politiques, Moyen Congo Rapport Annuel sur la Colonie du Moyen Congo, 1920.

the missionaries’ activities, it has been possible to break the silence of those colonised populations who have not left many sources behind. I have let the archives and documents speak. Undoubtedly, there are, there have been and there will be limits, because the colonised speak through words prepared and written by the coloniser, unless other sources and testimonies come to light. Meike de Goede (2017: 196), for example, speaks of “colonial aphasia” with regard to the registration in 1959 of deported followers of André Matswa “[t]heir names appeared on the lists, but they were written wrong”. Thanks to the testimonies collected on the events of June and July 1959,²⁰ Meike de Goede was able to fill in the gaps and above all the unspoken and unwritten words in order to obtain a more complete and more faithful reconstruction of events, which took place in more recent, and therefore more accessible, times.

France kept the activities and relations of the French Communist Party and directives from Moscow under strict control, in particular with regard to French Equatorial Africa. Their tracts and leaflets highlighted the arrogance of French colonialism in words that were accessible to all, and also sent people to spread the *word* of the revolutionary propaganda of the Third International. In order to spread anti-colonial propaganda, the Communist Party had created a body called the Section Centrale Coloniale which was joined by the Confédération Générale du Travail Unitaire (CGTU). The activities of these two organisations were under the political office of the Communist Party and the Secretary of the CGTU, who provided the support of the working masses for the propaganda to be spread among people from the colonies living in the metropolis and the indigenous people in the colonies. According to orders received from Moscow, the propaganda materials had to arrive in the colonial territories clandestinely through the mediation of the Clubs Internationaux des Marins, which were part of the Internationale Syndicale Rouge and located in the ports where the most important shipping lines were based, such as Marseille and Bordeaux. One example of a pamphlet was the *Ouvrier Nègre*, which contained revolutionary articles that, thanks to the reports by the well-known agent Désiré, we know were distributed in Paris and Marseille. There are a number of reports by secret agents on the distribution of the brochures and tracts that were sent from Marseille to the colonies by the “navigateurs”.²¹ Pravda, the Soviet newspaper, was placed under strict control: for example, in 1929 it was reported by the CAI that Pravda was waging a violent campaign against French colonial policy. Pravda accused the *controller* Raphaël

²⁰ After the death of André Grenard, in 1942, his followers considered him a prophet, continuing to resist and waiting for his return, to free the Congolese people from the colonial administration that, meanwhile, was unable to really oppose this movement of resistance. In the late 1950s this movement intertwined with the political transition process that led to the Congolese independence in 1960. The Matswaniti were, therefore, considered an element of disturbance and confusion and a threat to public order. Their resistance acts were criminalised by a series of laws and, in June 1959, a series of violent attacks against them were carried out, leading to their deportation. On this topic see de Goede (2017).

²¹ ANOM SLOTFOM, Série XIII, Carton 3, Le Président du Conseil Ministre de l’Intérieur Direction de la Sûreté Générale à Monsieur le Ministre des Colonies, Cabinet, Paris, le 27 mars 1931.

Antonetti (who was the Governor of French Equatorial Africa at the time) “of being responsible for the deaths of numerous workers employed in the construction of the railway line”.²²

It is an established fact that the propaganda material arrived in Equatorial Africa, just as it is certain that in the light of the limited success of revolutionary propaganda, Communist Party militants tried to create a truly effective liaison service with numerous agents, in order to be able to spread Marxist works on a large scale, while simplifying their doctrine, within the reach of the natives.²³

Another element is the presence of Bolshevik agents in FEA. For example, in October 1934 a secret report was sent by Renard, the then-Governor-General of FEA, to the Governor of the Gabonese territory, that stated:

I am sending you a copy of a letter from a Bolshevik agent who apparently visited FEA, Middle Congo to be precise, in 1933. Relations between whites and blacks are very simple: the whites exploit the blacks. The blacks hate the whites, and only obey them because they are afraid. Slavery still exists. There are intelligent people among the black tribes who can understand and learn. Our work (Communist propaganda) is possible because blacks are very hostile towards their white exploiters, but it is extremely difficult because the administration and colonists watch every new arrival closely. The white (propagandists) must penetrate as businesspeople, experts and tourists. But the real work can only be done by a black. Everything must be done to form high-quality, loyal groups among blacks. One question that needs to be studied is the secret sects and associations that proliferate among black people. My impression is that none of them represent a fertile ground for propaganda and revolutionary organisation.²⁴

The Bolshevik agent was not far from the truth, in fact: the activities of two movements, Kimbanguism and Amymicism (*Société Amicale*), which later became Matswanism, whose leaders (Simon Kimbangu and André Matswa Grenard) were two African men from FEA (Middle Congo), filled many pages of the reports written by the CAI, the local and federal Governors and the heads of territories, as well as reports by the Governor-General to the Minister of the Colonies, and on the cult regime and presence of the Protestant missions.²⁵ As there are many documents relating to these religious movements, it is possible for the researcher to extrapolate

²² ANOM SLOTFOM, Série III, Carton 142, Rapport du CAI, Paris, le 20 juillet 1929.

²³ On this topic see Collotti and Robertazzi (1968), O'Melia (1980), Wilson (1974).

²⁴ ANOM AEF, 5 D 68, Le Gouverneur Général de l'Afrique Équatoriale Française Officier de la Légion d'Honneur à Monsieur l'Administrateur Supérieur représentant le Gouverneur Général dans le territoire du Gabon Libreville, Brazzaville, le 26 octobre 1934, Secret.

²⁵ ANOM SLOTFOM, Série III, Carton 17, Note pour le Cabinet du Ministre relative à l'association amicale des originaires de l'Afrique Equatoriale qui demande au ministre de vouloir bien accepter la présidence d'honneur de ce groupement, Paris 14 octobre, 1926; ANOM AEF, 5 D 97, Notes du Ministère sur la propagande révolutionnaire dans les pays d'outre-mer, Troubles à Brazzaville, Paris, le 30 avril 1930; ANOM AEF, 5D 67, Le Lieutenant-Gouverneur du Moyen-Congo à Monsieur le Gouverneur Générale, Brazzaville, le 12 avril 1930, Confidentiel; ANOM AEF, 5D 127, L'Administrateur-Maire de Brazzaville à Monsieur le Gouverneur Général sur le mouvement des “Originaires de l'AEF, 20 Mai, 1933, Très Confidentiel; ANOM AEF, 5D 127, L'Administrateur-Maire de Brazzaville à Monsieur le Gouverneur Général chargé de

from them the voices of the subalterns, to allow them to speak and to reconstruct their reactions to the abuses of colonialism. No doubt, these reactions placed the French administration in a difficult position. One should also underline the important role of insurrection strategies in the territories such as Middle Congo that were subject to French domination, whose resistance struggle, particularly after World War I, can be connected with and interpreted as a consequence of close links to previous insurrectional ideologies and French propaganda. One relevant example is that of Kimbangism.

Kimbangism is a religious movement that was born in Belgian Congo in 1921 under the guidance of the Gunza (prophet, messiah) Simon Kimbangu, who was from the Kongo ethnic group. Swedish missionaries from Middle Congo had made many proselytes among the Bakongos, a people that for centuries was settled on both banks of the middle course of the Congo River, and therefore on both French and Belgian territory. There were no national or administrative borders for these people, and so people, goods and new ideas crossed the river in both directions, traversing the borders of districts and regions. The Bakongo from the French area showed a clear tendency to emancipate themselves from the coloniser. Before the Swedish mission schools opened,²⁶ the French government had required that teaching be in French, but despite assurances, the catechists were able to read and write in Kikongo and to comment freely on the Bible translated into their language.²⁷ Attendance at the Swedish schools was relatively high.²⁸

Kimbangu claimed to have been sent “to the black race” by God, as his son. His doctrine and morals, while based on the Protestant faith, were intended to be a new revelation, a new truth proposed by a Black man to Black people. The Swedish missions took enormous advantage of this situation, so much so that in less than a year they recorded more than two thousand baptisms.²⁹

Simon Kimbangu had attended the Protestant missions and was a catechist, as were his followers, his “apostles”. The urge to react to the growing discontent towards the colonial administration had its origins in the activities of the African catechists who

l’Administration du Moyen-Congo, Brazzaville, le 23 juin 1933, Etat d’esprit de la population Balali.

²⁶ Swedish mission schools opened to prepare Africans to a new level of education, perhaps political too, particularly teaching on protestant religion principles, writing and reading.

²⁷ ANOM AEF, 5 D 51, Mouvement N’Gounziste-Kibangiste (1921–1925). Le Gouverneur Général à Monsieur le Ministre des Colonies, Brazzaville, le 5 septembre 1921; Relation des propos tenus par divers catéchistes et nombreux indigènes de la Subdivision de Boko, janvier 1924, no. 13; P.A. Westlind, Directeur de la Mission Protestante Suédoise de Brazzaville à Monsieur Le Gouverneur Général dell’AEF, 23 avril 1924.

²⁸ Swedish missionaries had three schools in 1924: one in Madzia, with 78 boys and 28 girls and one in Indo, near Sibiti, with 20 students. The third was a technical school in Brazzaville, with 22 students. ANOM, Sous-Série 4 (2) D 38, Rapport Politique, Moyen Congo, 1924.

²⁹ In the competition among Christian missions to evangelise they had a bigger number of followers. On this topic see Carcangiu (2002: 161–170).

had been trained as teachers by the Protestant missions.³⁰ They organised meetings in the Swedish missions that were attended by men and women, as well as by local and village chiefs. During the meetings, religious songs had an undisputed political and anticolonial content.³¹ These meetings therefore ended up by offering a formidable opportunity for proselytising and creating political solidarity against the colonisers.

The Kimbangist movement was born in Belgian Congo, but it soon spread to the other bank of the river, in Middle Congo, causing the French reaction. The then-Governor of French Equatorial Africa, Victor Augagneur, initially expressed keen concern about the influence of the phenomenon in the colonies he administered. The clearly anti-European character of the movement alarmed the authorities, to the point that they ordered the immediate arrest of any individual believed to be a member of the Kimbangist faith on charges of practicing witchcraft. These severe measures convinced Augagneur that he had foiled any possible attacks on the French presence, believing in the “mobility of spirit” of blacks, who would soon return to their “normal” state of mind. Until the end of 1921, however, the problem of the Kimbangists in Middle Congo was a constant subject of correspondence both among administrators in French Equatorial Africa and between these same administrators and the authorities in the Belgian Congo.³² Despite the optimism shown by the French administrators regarding the repercussions of Kimbangism, there were public demonstrations in Middle Congo, in the subdivision of Boko, very close to the capital of FEA, Brazzaville, in 1922 and 1923, which were immediately repressed, with a number of people being imprisoned.³³ A new resurgence of the movement began between December 1923 and January 1924 with the usual singing demonstrations, but above all with abstentions from work on Wednesdays and Saturdays, with the inevitable negative consequences for the subdivision’s already disastrous economy.³⁴ To resolve this problems, French officials directed their attention towards three distinct groups: African chiefs, the Swedish missions, who were increasingly ambiguous and, considering the sources used, seemed deeply involved in both the revolt and the movement, and the indigenous people themselves. As regards the first group, the loyalty of the chiefs to the coloniser was not out into question. The second group was anxious to demonstrate that they were extraneous to the turbulence of the subdivision, and they were asked to disavow the Gunzist catechists, even though

³⁰ See Sinda (1972); ANOM AEF, 5 D 51, Un Messie au Congo de L. Bartholi, Administrateur des Colonies, 11 février 1922; ANOM AEF, 5 D 64, Rapport sur le mouvement Gounziste en 1924 dans la subdivision de Boko, 15 février 1924 (Marchand).

³¹ Martial Sinda (1972: 104) noted a lack of the strength and freshness typical of black spirituals in Gunzist hymns. The reasons for this were to be found in their strict fidelity to biblical texts and the insufficient number of composers.

³² Most of the correspondence can be found in the file ANOM AEF, 5 D 51.

³³ On this topic see Carcangiu (2002: 171–174).

³⁴ The texts of the hymns had a very specific purpose: to attack whites and the colonial administration by demonstrating their impotence. ANOM AEF, 5 D 51, Relation (Servel, Brenière, Bordesw, Kodja) des propos tenus par divers catéchistes et nombreux indigènes de la Subdivision de Boko, no. 13, 4 janvier 1924.

the Swedish missionaries kept them in the missions as ordinary workers.³⁵ As for any indigenous person who had the audacity to disturb the public order, the solution was a system of penalties from payment of a fine to incarceration, while others were forced to work on the Brazzaville-Océan railway. For the French administration, however, after the gruelling interrogations and punishments, it was clear that the population of the Boko subdivision was not acting independently but was subject to various pressures and instructions. On 10 January 1924, the *Avenir Colonial Belge* claimed that the Kimbangist movement promoted the ideas of Marcus Garvey.³⁶ In fact, these were the years when the activities of Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association, which was finding fertile ground in the Americas and in Africa with its promise of "Africa for Africans" and of self-determination. The propaganda network of what would be called black Zionism had links everywhere: American ships in African and Indian ports were carrying not only goods, but also the Garveyist ideology on the strength and unity of black Africans.

Between 1924 and 1925, following the spread of Kimbangism in Middle Congo and the subsequent riots, the CAI, which had begun an in-depth study of the issue, reached a number of interesting conclusions. The Third International had hoped that religious "fanaticism" would be fomented and directed in a way that would be hostile to Europeans.³⁷ Since January 1924, CAI officials had reported "mystical tendencies of Blacks converted by the Protestant missions that could be exploited by the agitators". Thus, speculations were made about a possible connection between Garveyism and Communism, and between Garveyism, Communism and Kimbangism. The CAI's June report of the same year was even more supporting this point, and provided facts and evidence: "Fatefully, the Kimbangist movement was called to attract the attention of the communists. It can be seen from the directives sent to the French section of the Third International by the Eastern Propaganda Secretary [...] that the Kimbangist movement might serve as a signal for a revolutionary movement".³⁸

After the Sixth Congress of the Comintern, however, the policy adopted by the Communists in support of the Garveyist movement changed: while in the early 1920s it was considered a mission to spread the Communist revolutionary message in Africa, "after 1928 it was seen as a reactionary force that was no longer suitable to be the subject of assistance from the Comintern" (Wilson, 1974: 168).³⁹ Moreover, the colonial world had begun to be in turmoil since the end of World War I, and the echo of this "awakening" had also crossed the African equatorial forest. In Libreville, Gabon,

³⁵ ANOM AEF, 5 D 51, L'Administrateur des Colonies, Servel, Chef de la Subdivision de Boko à Monsieur le Chef de la Circonscription du Pool, pièce no. 2, 4 janvier 1924.

³⁶ ANOM AEF, 5 D 51, A weekly Belgian colonial magazine based in Kinshasa.

³⁷ ANOM AEF, 5 D 57, Notes du Ministère sur la propagande révolutionnaire communiste dans les pays d'Ostre-Mer 1924.

³⁸ Ibidem.

³⁹ The official declaration of the Sixth Congress stated: "Garveyism, which was once the ideology of the Black middle class and workers, and still has influence over the negro masses, is now impeding the movement of these masses towards a revolutionary position. While it initially defended total social equality for Black people, this has changed into a form of Black Zionism that instead of combatting American imperialism has coined the slogan Return to Africa" (Wilson 1974: 169).

the Jeunes Gabonais movement, which was mainly made up of clerks and accountants employed by the administration and trading houses, demanded independence for Gabon and the right to elect representatives. There were also demonstrations against the French authorities in Ubangi Chari and Chad.⁴⁰ In Middle Congo, Kimbangism seemed to be the only force capable of achieving concrete results and securing a large following.

In the same period, the Société Amicale des Originaires de l'Afrique Equatoriale Française, was founded by André Matswa Grenard in Paris in 1926. The urban and metropolitan environment in which it first developed—which was totally alien to and far from that of Middle Congo—helped to envelop the association in a strong cultural—and subsequently political—aura, thus distinguishing it from other typical religious organisations born in Africa. As the founder of the Association, Grenard addressed an open letter to President Poincaré in which he condemned the Code de l'Indigénat, the abuses by commercial companies and the miserable conditions of the Black population (Coquery Vidrovitch, 1983: 49–51). Its goal was the unification of the inhabitants of Equatorial Africa and a return to its lost independence, beyond the administrative borders created by the colonisers. These claims alarmed both Paris and Brazzaville. Paris was convinced that Grenard was not able to write such a letter, and thus maintained that someone outside the association “whom the CAI has not been able to identify, is acting in the shadows, and one day this association will seek to play a political role, like all those that exist or that attempts have been made to form in recent years”.⁴¹ Authorities in Brazzaville were worried, too: “[t]he association seems to be pursuing other ends, including that of creating a certain degree of agitation in the colony. I ask you, Minister, to proceed with a serious investigation of this society's true objective, and above all whether its founder has a relationship with Communist and Bolshevik circles with which he might pursue his purposes in the FEA”.⁴² On 13 August 1929, agent Coco reported as follows: “On 11 August, Grenard joined the Association of Congolese natives with the Ligue de Défense de la Race Nègre. He manifested feelings of revolt against the metropolis and advocated the union of all Black people to drive the whites out from their country. When he left, he asked to be given newspapers to send to the colony to be distributed among the members of his organisation. He took about twenty copies”.⁴³ The French government used the supposed irregularities in raising funds for the dissemination of information to accuse Matswa of embezzlement. He was arrested at the end of 1929 and taken to Brazzaville, where he was sentenced by the local court to three years in prison and ten years of exile in Chad. Before the trial, an event took place that had not been foreseen by the colonial administration because they were convinced that the

⁴⁰ ANOM AEF, 5 D 65, Notes du Ministère sur la propagande révolutionnaire communiste dans les pays d'Outre-Mer, 1926; ANOM AEF, 5 D 68, Propagande révolutionnaire, 1926–1934.

⁴¹ ANOM SLOTFOM, Série III, Carton 17, Note pour le Cabinet du Ministre relative à l'Association amicale des originaires de l'Afrique Équatoriale qui demande au Ministre de vouloir bien accepter la présidence d'honneur de ce groupement, Paris, 14 octobre 1926.

⁴² ANOM SLOTFOM, Série III, Carton 17, Le Gouverneur Général de l'Afrique Équatoriale Française à Monsieur le Ministre des Colonies, Brazzaville, le 6 mai 1927.

⁴³ ANOM SLOTFOM, Série III, Carton 17, Rapport de l'Agent Coco, 13 August 1929.

people of FEA were not aware of the sentence and thus could not cause trouble. The Bakongo led by the Lari, did indeed respond and organised a strike. These events had considerable repercussions, and even newspapers such as *L'Avenir Colonial Belge* and *L'Humanité* reported about the events in Brazzaville with headlines such as: “[e]xploited and dispossessed by imperialism, the Black people of Brazzaville demonstrate violently against a hateful sentence”⁴⁴; “[t]he Ministry’s lies cannot hide the formidable state of fervour in Brazzaville”.⁴⁵ George Padmore, a USA Communist Party activist originally from Trinidad, commented:

In FEA [...] the natives revolted again in 1930. A white revolutionary French worker and several natives were arrested in Brazzaville and sentenced to three years in prison for trying to organise a trade union. When the verdict was published, several thousand native workers struck and went to the court to demand freedom for their comrades. For several days, life in Brazzaville was paralysed, and the native districts were occupied by troops [...]. This region is seen as the base of operations by indigenous Communist elements.⁴⁶

In a document from April 1931 drawn up by the Sureté Générale for the Minister of the Colonies on revolutionary propaganda in FEA, it was reported that:

The Third International has not found very fertile ground in Africa for its nefarious propaganda. It has, however, not failed to exploit the smallest incidents in order to create a nucleus of malcontents that would enable it to create solid bases for its work of social disintegration. The construction of the Congo-Océan railway has been an excuse to invite the natives to fight French imperialism. The French Communist Party has invited workers from the metropolis to send a delegation to investigate the atrocities committed in FEA. This appeal was published in *Pravda* on 18 February 1929. Even the trial of the Association of FEA natives was an occasion to foment disorder. This fraud was heard by the Native Court of Brazzaville in April 1930. Numerous natives—around a thousand—follow the debate in the court. After the sentence was read, the Europeans witnessed this disconcerting spectacle: the Blacks protested in favour of those who had stolen from them. There was a rather serious tumult and a number of projectiles were thrown at the police, who were finally able to control the situation.⁴⁷

The Société Amicale, or better Matswanism (or Balalism), had quite a peculiar trajectory and setting: its initial, well-defined political-revolutionary tendency and its final religious one, which matured slowly. In the metropolitan area, the movement had essentially political characteristics typical of a society like that of Paris, while in the colony it adapted to local conditions and had a mystical-religious existence, finally becoming a messianic movement whose implications still had an impact on social divisions in Congo during decolonisation, as de Goede (2018) has stressed.

⁴⁴ ANOM AEF, 5 D 67, *L'affaire des faux mutualistes noirs*, “*L'Avenir Coloniale Belge*”, 4 April 1930.

⁴⁵ ANOM AEF, 5 D 67, “*Au Congo Français*”, *L'Humanité*, 8 April 1930 and 16 April 1930.

⁴⁶ George Padmore, *La vie et les luttes des travailleurs nègres, Maison des Syndicats*, Service de Imprimerie (s.d.), Petite Bibliothèque de l'Internationale Syndicale Rouge, XXXVII, p. 127.

⁴⁷ ANOM SLOTFOM, Série XIII, Carton 3, *Le Président du Conseil Ministre de l'Intérieur: Direction de la Sureté Générale à Monsieur le Ministre des Colonies*, Paris, 28 avril 1931.

Conclusion

The documents I consulted are of different levels of importance, but it was clear from the very beginning that behind the study of those religious messianic movements that were the subject-matter of the project, there was a different voice in those dusty reports, which I treated with great caution for fear of damaging them. They represent an unwritten testimony that bears witness to a strong reaction to the colonial domination by the French colonisers, who reacted powerfully to maintain their hegemony and authority. Also, in the numerous reports, the French dwelt on analysing the actions of their subjects, sometimes in detail, and above all, a colonial action or reaction corresponded to an action or reaction by the colonised people, and vice versa. It was precisely this mechanism that allowed me to let the documents from the colonial archives speak.

I would like to conclude by quoting Carlo Ginzburg (2019: xxii), with whom I agree: “[a]lthough they are no longer ignored by historians, the lower classes are still condemned to remain ‘silent’. [...] But if the documentation offers us the opportunity to reconstruct not only indistinct masses but also individual personalities, it would be absurd to discard it”.

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Biographies and Autobiographies as Epistemological Challenges

Songs, Poems and Left-Wing “Heroes”: The Soft Power of the Sudanese Left



Elena Vezzadini

Abstract Taking its inspiration from the scholarship of Irma Taddia and the central place occupied by biographies in her work, this article explores the contribution made by artistic productions such as songs and poems when read in the light of the biographies of the people who produced them as sources for writing political history *from below*. It looks at the lives of three Sudanese artists, Muhammad Wardi, Mustafa Sid Ahmad and Mahjoub Sharif, two musicians and a writer, whose lives and work made them popular left-wing heroes and symbols of resistance against oppressive governments. Indeed, the existence of leftist *heroes* such as these explains one of the paradoxes of Sudanese historiography—the resilience of leftist ideals, values, and forms of opposition in Sudan in spite of ruthless repression that leftist parties went through from 1970.

Keywords Sudanese history · Biographies of artists · Sudanese music · Leftist cultures · Soft power

This chapter is a development of a topic I discussed in Vezzadini E., *Leftist Leanings and the Enlivening of Revolutionary Memory*, “Noria Research”, 15 May 2019, <https://noria-research.com/cultures-of-the-left-and-revolutionary-memory-in-sudan/> (last accessed on 18 October 2023). However, the argument and the empirical material have been considerably expanded, as research on the subject has progressed since then. For this chapter, I am heavily indebted to Mahassin ‘Abd al-Jalil, a historian at the University of Bahri, who has given me a great deal of additional information on the Sudanese artists I discuss here.

E. Vezzadini (✉)

Institute des Mondes Africains, CNRS, Paris, France

e-mail: elena.vezzadini@cnsr.fr

Introduction: Music as a Source

The study of songs, music and performances as a source for historical research is a well-trodden path in African studies,¹ although it has not developed at an equal pace in the various regions of the continent.² Because of the importance of orality in African studies, scholars have been quicker to make use of this source and more sensitive to it than those working in other study areas, particularly European history.³ Music has been analysed in many different ways and through many social meanings. For instance, folk songs have been integrated into studies on oral traditions as an essential means by which this tradition has expressed and still expresses itself (Alagoa, 1968: 3). More frequently, musical repertoires have been a precious source for writing political history *from below*. Music is powerfully connected to emotions, which have gained increasing attention in recent studies on social and political movements.⁴ It may become a tool for resistance, for example when songs are used as *coded language* either by the artists or by the public listening to them (Geest & Asante-Darko, 1982). A number of authors working in different African countries have shown how songs have been crucial in liberation movements leading to regime changes,⁵ but also in keeping a regime in place (Monte, 2017), or encouraging people to take up weapons. One notorious instance of this is the Rwandan genocide, as various studies have shown the role of songs before, during and after the genocide (for example: Chemouni & Mugiraneza, 2020; Li, 2004; McCoy, 2009; Mwambari, 2020). Finally, historians

¹A note on the translations. Apart from the fact that no English translation could ever do justice to the musicality of these texts in their original language, I am not a professional translator. The aim of these translations, which in most cases are joint endeavours, is therefore not to attempt to reproduce the aesthetics of the songs, but just to give an idea of their political message. I wish to thank Muhammad ‘Abd al-Qadir for his linguistic assistance with the translation of some difficult texts. ‘Abd al-Qadir Atwab and Mahassin ‘Abd al-Jalil also collaborated with the translations. In some cases, translations are taken from the YouTube channel *The Sound of Sudan* produced by a team of bilingual Sudanese-English speakers, they are reputed to be excellent: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCFN92BiTH14qJ7BU5FET4gQ> (last accessed on 18 October 2023). Where this is the case, the channel will be credited in the text.

²Southern Africa is beyond doubt the region where this issue has been explored most extensively. A few glimpses of this very rich production can be found in Coplan (1979, 1994); Coplan and Wright (1985); Erlmann (1991); Gray (2004); and Ansell (2005).

³For an exception see Gilbert (2005); and for some general considerations see Matt Karush, “Music in History: Overcoming Historians’ Reluctance to Tackle Music as a Source,” *OUPblog*, 15 January 2019, <https://blog.oup.com/2019/01/musicology-analyzing-music-in-history/> (last accessed on 18 October 2023).

⁴The *classical* authors on this scholarship are Jasper and Goodwin. For the core works, see Goodwin, Jasper and Polletta (2006); Goodwin, Jasper and Polletta (2009); and Jasper (2018). For a comparative approach on South Asia, see Blom and Lama-Rewal (2019).

⁵See examples on Mozambique (Vail and White 1983); Ghana (Geest and Asante-Darko 1982); Kenya (Nyairo and Ogude 2005; Wilson 2006); and Somalia (Legum 1963). For a general overview, see Allen (2004).

have cast light on the importance of music in social history. It has been seen not only as the form of popular culture *par excellence* in predominantly non-literate societies that is able to express “information unlikely to be preserved in the direct historical traditions handed down formally or officially” (Alagoa, 1968: 3) but also in terms of its role in spreading news, thereby functioning as the “newspapers” of non-literate societies (Mano, 2007). Music has also been studied in relation to technological change (from the invention of the radio to circulation on the internet), and to the way such changes lead to musical opportunities and the re-semantisation of a *traditional* or *folk* repertoire in new popular and sometimes *global* forms (Garofalo, 1993; Martin, 1991).

Compared with this impressive scholarship, this chapter, which analyses the biographies and artistic output of three of the most iconic artists associated with the Sudanese left—Muhammad Wardi (1932–2013), Mustafa Sid Ahmad (1953–1996), and Mahjoub Sharif (1948–2014)—has far humbler goals and objectives in terms of both historiography and research. On the one hand, as I will discuss in the next section, my aim is to attempt to respond to a specific problem of Sudanese historiography: that is, the resilience of the Sudanese Communist party in spite of its constant repression and its life in the underground. On the other, the empirical material presented here is part of ongoing research, and the results are only partial, for example because I was not able to interview the families of the late artists. Also, I have no data on how the songs studied here were received *at the moment when they were produced*, and how they spread and came to be hits—especially in the face of the enormous political and technological constraints of these times of repression. I have also few details about how they were performed, and the transformations in their performance with the technological changes. I was only able to witness their fame during my periodical fieldwork (from the 2000s to 2022) because many of their songs were still being played on the air decades after they had been composed, and from the accounts of these artists’ enthusiastic fans. Last but not least, not only would each of the artists I analyse here deserve a monograph to themselves, due not only to their musical innovations and the dense lives they lived, but also to the hundreds of songs and poems they wrote or put to music, which merit specific annotated anthologies. In this sense, this chapter does not do justice to their lives and repertoires, and my only hope is that it will encourage further research on the subject. At a more general level, contrary to what has been the case in other African countries, songs have hardly been used at all as sources for writing the history of contemporary Sudan, and the history of arts and literature in Sudan is a very recent field of exploration, at least for non-Sudanese historians.⁶

⁶Recent works on Sudanese literature in English include Babikir (2019); Shringarpure et al. (2016); El-Nour (1997), with bibliographic references to Sudanese masterpieces in Arabic. On music in Arabic, see Sanūsī (2014); Yasin (2005); and Daw et al. (1999). On Sudanese military music, see Ghandūr (2007). On women and music, see Abd al-Qayyūm (2011). Academic literature in English on the history of music in Sudan is conspicuous for its virtual absence: to date, the only existing work known to the author is Sikainga (2008), “A Musical History,” *Blog Afropop*, <https://afropop.org/articles/ahmad-sikainga-on-sudan-a-musical-history> (last accessed on 18 October 2022).

Still, I hope this chapter might make a small contribution to current approaches to music as a source. Indeed, inspired by the landmark scholarship of Irma Taddia on biographies in the writing of African history (for example see Taddia, 1988, 1996, 2008), I focus on the connection between biographies and musical repertoires as a way of understanding historical phenomena (such as the resilience of the left in Sudan). The idea is to weave the political creations of the three artists and their biographies together, or rather, the elements in their biographies that are most often recalled and that contribute towards shaping them not only as musical “stars”, but above all as “heroes” and “martyrs” for their political ideas. By making a series of difficult choices, artistically, personally and politically, these three artists staged their lives as examples of virtuous and heroic resistance to oppression. When their political songs and poems were hummed by ordinary citizens during political events such as gatherings, sit-ins and marches, they were sung not only for their highly political and value-charged content, but also because they were associated with artists who had lived these ideals to their extreme consequences, and who were seen as role models and examples of the capacity of the oppressed for resistance and resilience. In this way, the content of the songs, when read in the light of the artists’ biographies and vice-versa, may explain the extraordinary power of these icons and their songs as the archetypes of Sudanese revolutions and revolutionaries until today. Finally, I have included two forms of art—music and poetry—because of their profound contiguity in the musical world of contemporary Sudan, as we will see.

This chapter is drawn from varied but consistent sources on Sudanese music found in various internet forums—given the local popularity of these artists, there is an abundance of information—and an extensive collection of their songs, also available on the internet. However, my understanding of the social and political significance of their lives and work relies entirely on my fieldwork. During my trips to Sudan in the 2000s and 2010s, I experienced the political songs of these left-wing “heroes” as part of people’s everyday lives, at least in the northern urban centres. Popular leftist songs were played on cassettes and later CDs and mp3s in buses and taxis. People listened to them in their cars, in their homes and while attending to their daily chores. Even during the most repressive years of Umar al-Bashir’s Islamist regime, it was impossible to censor this impressive canon of songs or to erase the immense popularity the left-wing “martyrs” enjoyed. To quote Muhammad Wardi, “[art is like water: you can’t seal off its source. It will trickle inexorably through the rocks to emerge in a new spring somewhere else]”.⁷

Considering the number of writers and singers on the left who enjoy the same type of celebrity, the selection I have made here is arbitrary, and relates more to my own musical experience than anything else. However, they also represent excellent cases in point of what I have mentioned above: on the one hand, the

⁷Ahmed Zaki Osman, ‘Like Water’: A Tribute to Legendary Sudanese Singer Mohammed Wardi, *Egypt Independent*, 20 February 2012, <https://www.egyptindependent.com/water-tribute-legendary-sudanese-singer-mohammed-wardi/> (last accessed on 18 October 2023).

entrenchment of the Sudanese left as a soft power⁸; and on the other, the benefits of reading biographies and repertoires as interlocking components for understanding the political and emotional power of music. In the following sections, I will first summarise the history of the Sudanese left,⁹ and then move on to a description of the lives and productions of the three Sudanese artists.

The Soft Power of the Sudanese Left

In spite of the fact that the forces of the left have operated underground for most of their history and have suffered from severe and increasing persecution, they have continued to be a presence in the Sudanese political landscape up to the most recent revolutionary moment of 2018–19.

The Sudanese Communist Party (SCP, *al-Hizb al-Shuyu 'i al-Sudani*) has often been described as one of the largest and best-organised of the communist parties in Africa and the Middle East.¹⁰ However, while the SCP had an estimated 50,000–80,000 members at the beginning of the 1970s, in reality its popularity had been slow to grow (Ismael, 2012: 1). One should compare these figures with that from 1958, two years after Sudan’s independence, when the party included only 750 members. At the time of its foundation in the 1940s (officially in 1946), it only had a handful of members (El-Amin, 1996a, 1996b, 1997). In all Sudanese elections since the years of independence, the so-called “traditional” parties, in particular the Umma Party¹¹ and the National Unionist Party (NUP),¹² which had ties to the country’s nineteenth century religious and political history, had an absolute

⁸In short, the concept of “soft power” is borrowed from international relations, where it has become a very popular topic, starting from the works of Nye (1990), who underlined the uncoercive dimension of the geopolitical influence of superpowers such as the United States through “attraction” and “persuasion”, and chiefly through culture (see for instance Watanabe and McConnell 2015).

⁹By this term I include all political organisations that explicitly adopted a Marxist ideological framework.

¹⁰A good starting point, albeit in no way an exhaustive bibliography, for the study of the SCP is: Niblock (1987); Warburg (1978); Ismael (2012); Qaddāl (1999); Abusharaf (2010); and Kurita who also provides a summary of the most important scholarship in Arabic in Kurita Y. (2019), “The Sudanese Communist Movement”, in Thomas Spear (ed.) *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of African History*, <https://oxfordre.com/africanhistory/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190277734.001.0001/acrefore-9780190277734-e-14> (last accessed on 18 October 2023).

¹¹The Umma Party included the supporters of the family of the Sudanese Mahdi Muḥammad Aḥmad (1844–1885), who had managed to end the Turco-Egyptian domination over Sudan and create an independent Mahdist State.

¹²The National Union Party was the party linked to the Khatmiyya Sufi brotherhood, which was the country’s most important *ṭarīqa* at the time. During the nineteenth century, it became pre-dominant throughout the Ottoman-Egyptian domination.

majority of votes. The Communist Party's spectacular expansion would be hard to understand if we failed to make the connection with an earlier phenomenon in the history of the left: the spread of the trade union movement. This is why it is important to distinguish the Communist Party from what might more broadly be termed the "forces of the left", a distinction that is particularly pertinent here, as several actors who participated in the spread of leftist ideas through popular culture were not officially members of the Communist Party, in spite of their Marxist language.

Indeed, during the period around independence, it was not the Communist Party but the trade unions—first among them the Railways Union—that made up the largest radical anticolonial force (Mūsā 2007). The trade union movement enjoyed phenomenal growth between the end of the 1940s and the 1950s. In 1951, for instance, an estimated 70,000–120,000 workers were unionised, an amazing number if one considers that these unions did not exist until 1948 (Fawzi, 1957). The legalisation of unions and union law were obtained through a historic general strike in 1948, the first in a long series, which was led by railway workers in the industrial city of Atbara (Curlless, 2013; Sikainga, 2001, 2002, 2010). Through these strikes, substantial gains were obtained in terms of salary and working conditions. The accomplishments of the workers' movement strengthened the perception that colonial rule could be successfully challenged, leading to a climax that hastened the country's independence (Cross, 1997).

The unions' political posture was somewhat paradoxical. In fact, the most prominent union leaders, such as Shafi' Ahmad al-Shayk (Fédération Syndicale Mondiale, 1972) and Muhammad al-Sayyid Sallam, were members of the Communist Party. The language they used—through their press organs, for instance—featured strongly Marxist anti-imperialist ideas (Zayla'ī, 2012), and yet the bulk of workers, in particular railway workers, voted for other parties, first and foremost the NUP. At the outset, the Communist Party was not perceived as being close to the rural or urban popular classes, as it was made up of an elite of graduate professionals working in prestigious professions such as teaching, the law and medicine.

In the absence of electoral success, Communist Party members worked hard to spread their social project, working hand in hand with the trade union cadres, supporters and volunteers. The most vivid testimonies to the effects of this cultural policy come from the city of Atbara, the beating heart of Sudanese trade unionism (Sikainga, 2002). Some of the people who grew up there in the 1950s and 1960s are still alive. For many years, my office was close to that of the late Anwar 'Abd al-Majid (1952–2017), an Atbara-born scholar who was later forced into exile to flee the Nimeiri regime.¹³ He described to me the cultural projects organised by the *Atbarawi*, the citizens of Atbara, when he was a child: evening classes,

¹³After growing up in Atbara, he continued his studies abroad as an archaeologist and archeo-botanist. He became the Director of Khartoum University's Archaeology Department, but was then sacked for political reasons. We shared many years of tea and discussion at Bergen University's Centre for Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies.

literacy campaigns, reading clubs, theatrical performances and open conferences on Marxist history and global economy. At the end of the working day, employees hurried to attend their preferred classes, and people who had received higher education were recruited to teach others. He was certainly not the only person to have an idyllic vision of the city of Atbara: memories of this type are continuously re-evoked and emerged constantly in 2019 in songs and in the press, and fed imaginaries, utopias and revolutionary scenarios.¹⁴ These were bottom-up initiatives that started with workers and students, but it is an undeniable fact that members of the Communist Party played a role in spreading Marxism, for instance by proving reading materials and organisational techniques. According to Gizouli, “[a]mong the workers of Atbara, Sudan’s communists discovered the ‘people’ and it was among the workers of Atbara that a working-class nationalism, as opposed to the elite nationalism, took root”.¹⁵ More importantly for the topic of this paper, these accounts provide evidence of the centrality of culture in its different forms (theatrical plays, public lectures and literature readings) as a tool for spreading Marxism to the grassroots.

In 1958, General Ibrahim Abboud mounted a military coup in opposition to the stalemate of democratic rule to solve the question of the South, where a guerrilla war had been under way since 1955. The SCP played a central role in the popular revolution of October 1964 that toppled his regime. This contributed directly to the explosion in membership and placed the party in a position of strength immediately after the revolution (Berridge, 2015; Niblock, 1987). Indeed, the transitional government that led the country after Abboud’s ouster included various members of the SCP. The traditional parties—the Umma and the NUP—felt threatened by this wave of popularity, however, and together with Hassan al-Turabi’s Islamist party,¹⁶ they managed to ban the SCP from parliament, using blasphemous statements allegedly made by its members as a pretext. In the 1965 elections, therefore, communist candidates like Fatima Ahmad Ibrahim were only able to run as independents.

The party continued to function underground, and it was officers close to the Communist Party who in 1969 brought General Jaafar Nimeiri to power in a *coup d’état*. Relations between the Communist and Nimeiri quickly deteriorated, however, especially after an attempted coup organised by Communist generals in 1971 that

¹⁴Note for instance the number of blog posts in 2019 or later evoking the history of Atbara, the “cradle of Sudanese revolutions” (for example: <https://orientxxi.info/magazine/atbara-berceau-des-revolutions-soudanaises.3160>, and <https://sudanow-magazine.net/page.php?subId=25&Id=876>; last accessed on 22 December 2022). For examples of known published memories and tales about Atbara, see Mahdī (2012); ‘Ādil Sa’d Yūsuf (2013).

¹⁵El Gizouli (2019), “Class Dynamics, Dissemination of the Sudanese Uprising,” *Noria Research*, <https://noria-research.com/class-dynamics-dissemination-of-the-sudanese-uprising/> (last accessed on 18 October 2023). For another take on the same issue, see El-Amin (1986).

¹⁶At the time it was called the National Charter Front, and was later renamed the National Islamic Front. For an overview, see Warburg (1995) and El-Affendi (1991).

triggered what Kurita defines as the “ordeal” of the SCP.¹⁷ It was not only the generals who led the coup who were executed, but also CP cadres, including the head of the party, ‘Abd al-Khaliq Mahjub, and historic leaders of the trade union movement such as Al-Shafi’ Ahmad al-Shaykh, the husband of Fatima Ahmad Ibrahim. The abortive coup was followed by massive purges in both the private and public sectors, and thousands of people were arrested or dismissed, leading to the exile of an entire generation of leftist activists. This episode marked the beginning of the party’s spiralling decline.

In 1985, another Sudanese civil revolution brought about the fall of the Nimeiri regime. The Communist Party also contributed to the organisation of demonstrations and protest in this case. After Omar Al-Bashir’s military coup in 1989, the SCP was banned once again, and it was brutally repressed until the 2000s—with a partial relaxation around 2005 when the Comprehensive Peace Agreement was signed with South Sudan and John Garang. The SCP re-emerged during the 2019 Revolution, in which the communists were an important force in organising protests, and the revolution began with the workers and young people of Atbara.¹⁸

Despite the blow the military regimes dealt the Communist Party and the unremitting persecution endured by its members, Marxist ideology remained widespread through popular culture. Besides the political repression, the economic situation began to decline into a state of catastrophe from the late 1970s, a trend that only continued under Bashir’s regime, especially in the 1990s and again after the separation of the South in 2011. In these contexts of growing hardship, in particular for the popular classes, leftist artists became beloved stars and icons of the Sudanese resistance, and people began to imitate certain of their characteristics, such as the way they dressed or their hairstyles, as a sign of political resistance. In these authoritarian contexts, leftist artists saw their production as being made *for* helping people, not just to raise their consciousness of their situation of oppression, but also to comfort them by expressing and emphasising their own despair. They kept alive the message that people were unjustly oppressed and that this had to come to an end sooner or later. Moreover, each of the three “revolutionary moments” that have marked Sudanese history—in 1964, in 1985 and again in 2019—saw a boom in artistic production by Marxist artists, leaving a heritage of hope during times of repression.

Muhammad Wardi

Internationally, Muhammad Wardi (1932–2012) is probably the best known of the three artists I have selected. Known as “The last king of Nubia”, he has often been compared to Fela Kuti, and received many awards as one of the best African singer.

¹⁷ Kurita (2019), “The Sudanese Communist Movement”, in Thomas Spear (ed.), *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of African History*, <https://oxfordre.com/africanhistory/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190277734.001.0001/acrefore-9780190277734-e-14> (last accessed on 18 October 2023).

¹⁸ El Gizouli (2019), “Class Dynamics, Dissemination of the Sudanese Uprising,” *Noria Research*, <https://noria-research.com/class-dynamics-dissemination-of-the-sudanese-uprising/> (last accessed on 18 October 2023).

He is associated with the Sudanese “golden age” of music, which is usually considered to have been between the 1960s and the 1980s, although he continued to be immensely popular until (and after) his death in 2012. Wardi was a musical pioneer on several fronts. He sang in both Arabic and Nubian (a Northern Sudanese language that pre-dated the turn to Arabic), modernising the northern Sudanese repertoire, mixing his tunes with other international musical influences (notably Latin American) and experimenting with all kinds of instruments. He regularly worked with poets to put their rhymes to music. Although I focus on just a few of his revolutionary works here, the impressive repertoire of this very prolific songwriter, who recorded more than 300 songs, includes all types of music, from love songs to folk songs in Nubian, to nationalist songs celebrating Sudanese heritage.

Born to a Nubian family on Sawarda, a small island near Wadi Halfa,¹⁹ he lost his parents at an early age and was raised by an uncle who was fond of music, poetry and literature.²⁰ He was educated in the northern Sudanese city of Shendi, and returned to Wadi Halfa to work as a teacher, soon becoming involved in the local teachers’ union. It was as a representative of teachers from Northern Sudan that he travelled to Khartoum for the first time in 1953. His encounter with the music scene in the capital convinced him to become a professional singer, and he moved there after a few years. He had already become a well-known singer before independence, singing regularly on the first Sudanese radio station, Radio Omdurman. His leftist views developed after Nubian land was flooded to construct the Aswan Dam during the Abboud regime, so he joined the Communist Party. Winning his support was important for the SCP, and according to his son ‘Abd al-Wahab, “[They used to say that if you wanted the Communist Party to win the student vote, you just had to bring Mohammed Wardi to sing at the University of Khartoum, and that’s it. Everyone was going to vote for the left because he was the singer of the people]”.²¹ Abdullahi A. Gallab has described the literary and political activity that took place in his salon during the 1960s: “[His home was a salon—similar to the ones of the previous Sudanese era where great ideas were born. Conversations in that community of intellectuals were open-ended, recreating associations through conversations, intellectual debate, and amusement within inspiring settings and open heart and minds, the refined taste of an accommodating

¹⁹ Nubia is a region in the North of Sudan, characterised by a distinctive group of languages.

²⁰ Vik Sohonie, “The Story of Mohammed Wardi, ‘The Last King of Nubia’”, *OkayAfrica*, 17 September 2018, <https://www.okayafrica.com/mohammed-wardi-sudan-last-king-nubia/> (last accessed on 18 October 2023). See also Lemya Shammatt, “Remembering Muhammad Wardi: Censored, Banned, and Beloved,” *ArabLit & ArabLit Quarterly*, 18 February 2020, <https://arablit.org/2020/02/18/remembering-muhammad-wardi-censored-banned-and-beloved/> (last accessed on 18 October 2023).

²¹ Vik Sohonie, “The Story of Mohammed Wardi, ‘The Last King of Nubia’”, *OkayAfrica*, 17 September 2018, <https://www.okayafrica.com/mohammed-wardi-sudan-last-king-nubia/> (last accessed on 18 October 2023).

host]”.²² When the Revolution broke out in 1964, he composed one of the famous revolutionary tunes, *Uktuber al-akhdar* (“Green October”), which was part of a large body of musical compositions created by a group of artists to celebrate the revolution, which were often called “Uktubariyyat” (“Octoberisms”). Here is an extract from the lyrics:

Green October, with your name the land sings	باسمك الأخضر يا أكتوبر الأرض تغني
The fields burst into wheat, promise and hopes	والحقول اشتعلت قمحا ووعدا وتمني
The treasures were opened in the ground, calling	والكنوز انفتحت في باطن الأرض تتادي
With your name the people triumphed	باسمك الشعب انتصر
The wall of the prison was broken ²³	حائط السجن انكسر

At first, in line with the SCP, Wardi supported Nimeiri’s rise to power. After the communist counter-coup in 1971, he narrowly escaped execution, and spent two years in prison. He continued composing, however, and often sang songs by another artist who was persecuted by the government, Mahjoub Sharif. He went into exile in 1983 with the installation of the Islamic September laws, but returned in 1985 to participate in the *intifada*, as the events of 1985 are popularly known. He composed several revolutionary hymns, such as the popular *Ya Sha‘aban Lahabat Thawritak* (“O People, your revolution is your flame”),²⁴ and performed the song “We will build it” (*Hanabnihu*), which was written by Mahjoub Sharif just before the *intifada*, and was in reply to the question many people were asking: if Nimeiri goes, what is the alternative? This song offered a response: “We will build the alternative”.²⁵ Some of the words are:

We will build what we dream of daily,	حنينيهو لبنحلم بيهو يوماتي
A proud country, a strong country [...]	[...] وطن شامخ وطن عاتي
[We’ll have] hospitals instead of prisons	مكان السجن مستشفى
Colleges instead of exile	مكان المنفى كليّه
Roses instead of prisoners	مكان الأسري.. ورديه
Songs instead of heartbreak	مكان الحسره أغنيه

²² Abdullahi Gallab (2001), *Mohamed Wardi and the Reinvention of the Everyday Language* https://www.academia.edu/33901204/Mohamed_Wardi_and_the_Reinvention_of_the_Everyday_Language (last accessed on 18 October 2023).

²³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i9F1v9IX0UU> (last accessed on 18 October 2023).

²⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3RJ5viiAO9A>. (Last accessed on 18 October 2023).

²⁵ Translation by YouTube channel *The Sound of Sudan*. The full songs with lyrics translated into English can be found here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p45Gi9Dw978> (last accessed on 18 October 2023).

Instead of bullets, we'll have sparrows flying around water fountains [...]	[...] مكان الطلقة عصفوره تحلق حول نافوره
A country in which we can be equal	وطن بالفيهر نتساوى
Where we can dream, and study, and get medical care	نحلم..نقرا نتداوى
Where we can have homes, electricity, and water	مساكن كهريا ومويه
Darkness will vanish beneath our feet	تحتنا الظلمه تتهاوى

When Omar Al-Bashir came to power, Muhammad Wardi went into exile again, living between Cairo and the United States, but touring constantly. In 1997, from exile, he composed what would later become one of the songs of 2019: “Hand over the keys to the country” (*Sallim mafatih al-balad*), with words by the poet Muhammad al-Makki Ibrahim:

Hand over the keys to the country	سلم مفاتيح البلد
Our ancestors' traditions	تراث أجدادنا سلمنا
Our children's minds	عقول أولادنا سلمنا
Our guns, which are fired at us	بنادقنا البتضر بنا
Which are pointed at our chest,	الموجهة لي صدورنا
But are still ours	وبرضو حقنا
Hand them over	سلمنا
Hand over the keys to the country	سلم مفاتيح البلد
Hand over our abayas and our rosaries	سلم عباياتنا وملافحنا
Our Qorans and our rosaries	مصاحفنا ومسابحننا
Our mosques and our churches	جوامعنا وكنائسنا
Hand over the keys to the country	سلم مفاتيح البلد
Hand over the wasted time	سلمنا الزمان الضاع
The night of expatriation and heartaches	ليل الغربة والأوجاع
Our dreams that we dreamt	أحلامنا العشناها
For the beloved homeland that was left to starve ²⁶	مع الوطن العزيز الجاع

From his time in exile, his international popularity only grew, and he became immensely popular, not only in the Arab world, but perhaps even more on the African continent, filling stadiums of fans in Ethiopia, Eritrea, Somalia and Egypt, as well as Cameroon, Mauritania and many other African countries. Inside Sudan,

²⁶Translation by YouTube channel *The Sound of Sudan*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fa-faZMh1fRY> (last accessed on 18 October 2023).

musicians continued to play Wardi's songs in private performances. Especially at the outset, the Islamic regime was hostile towards "worldly music", arrested numerous musicians and banned others from public performances or the airwaves (Verney, 1998). The musicians of the Golden Age who did not go into exile responded to this hostility by playing revolutionary music such as Wardi's for small private confidential audiences. Songs were recorded during performances and passed from hand to hand in the form of cassettes.

Wardi eventually returned to Sudan in 2002, a period when Sudan opened up to some extent (It was the years leading to the Comprehensive Peace Agreement, signed in 2005).²⁷ Once he was there, thanks to his massive celebrity, he was tolerated to a degree by the authorities, even though he continued to be known for his bold attitude towards the government. In a sign of recognition, on his death in 2012, his funeral was broadcast on national television, and his music was declared to be a "national heritage" by the government.

To return to the question of arts, biography and politics, as we have seen, Wardi's popularity inside Sudan started much earlier than his international celebrity, and was propelled by a mixture of factors that blended musical talent and innovations with political engagement. During his times of imprisonment and exile, he continued to produce staunchly political and anti-regime—yet accessible and straightforward—songs; when the Sudanese people took to the streets against the regime, he returned from exile to support the struggle with his music. As various biographers have observed, his education as a teacher was important, as it probably contributed to a vocation to use music rather than classrooms as a means to reach out to people and instil a host of "virtuous" values in them that were directly related to Sudanese political problems, such as unity between North and South and among ethnic groups, the need for a redistribution of wealth, the struggle against dictatorial oppression, war, racism and empathy for the plight of internally displaced people. The fact that these songs were sung again and again in the most recent revolutionary events of 2018–2019 demonstrates that inside Sudan, the main heritage of Wardi's music lies less in his international fame than in the political and emotional power of his life and songs as examples of political resilience.

Mustafa Sid Ahmad

Like another great anticolonialist and nationalist musician, Khalil Farah,²⁸ who lived under the colonial rule and with whom he is often compared for both his musical innovation and his activist stance, Mustafa Sid Ahmed was a tormented

²⁷ This agreement was made between the Sudan People Liberation Army, led by John Garang, and the National Islamic Congress of Umar al-Bashir. It put a stop to a decades long civil war, and heralded in a period of relative but real pluralism and political freedom that lasted until 2011, when the South gained its independence from the North.

²⁸ See for instance his collection in Farah (1977).

musician who sang for his country and the Sudanese. He was also a polyvalent artist who experimented with various fine arts such as painting and sculpting.

He was born in 1953 to a peasant family of Northern Sudanese origin who settled a few miles from Hassahissa, in Gezira, the beating heart of the agricultural production of cotton and the collective peasant economy. He began his studies at a technical school, and was then given a place first at a high school in Port Sudan and later at the Teacher Training College in Omdurman, so he received an education similar to that of Wardi. In 1970, his elder brother, al-Maqbul, passed away at the age of only 27. He was a talented singer and writer, and had predicted that Mustafa would become one too. After his death, Mustafa decided to leave his teaching job and start writing, singing and composing music. He went to the National School for Arts and Music in Khartoum, earning his living at the same time as a textile designer for the Bahri Textile Factory. After five years at the school, he left without gaining his final diploma after quarrelling with the teachers and students.

Seeking to explore his own musical style, he grew increasingly close to a young generation of leftist symbolist poets, whose poetry he put to music.²⁹ This borrowing from poetry is one of his most distinctive characteristics, making his songs difficult to perform and sing and rendering his style inimitable. Because of the innovative and experimental characteristics of his songs, he was initially known only by small circles of listeners, but his popularity grew with time, as he ran increasing numbers of music sessions for students and common people, which were often improvised, and turned into moments of discussion and debate.

Mustafa Sid Ahmed left Sudan in 1980 because he was suffering from severe kidney problems that forced him to undergo a major operation in Moscow and then to remain abroad for treatment. He lived between Cairo and Doha until his death in 1996 at the age of just 43 of causes related to his kidney disease. He is said to have composed more than 450 songs from more than fifty poets, although most of his performances remained private and were recorded on cassettes, and it was only in the 1990s, while he was in exile, that he published his first commercial album (Noble Sadness, *al-Hizn al-Nabil*).

Whether he was a member of the Communist Party has been a subject of some debate,³⁰ but what emerges from these disputes is that Mustafa Sid Ahmed was a singer of the people, who cherished his independence from politics while being ideologically very close to the left. His repertoire shows his concern for social

²⁹For instance, Muhammad Taha al-Gaddal and Azhari Muhammad Ali. See Sadiq Al-Hilu, “al-Fannan Mustafa Sid Ahmad (The artist Mustafa Sid Amhad)”, *Sahifa al-Rakuba*, 27 June 2020, <https://www.alrakoba.net/31411870/> (last accessed on 18 October 2023).

³⁰See in particular this long page of discussion in SudaneseOnline: “Hal Mustafa Sid Ahmad ‘adu fi al-hizb al-shuiyu ‘i (was Mustafa Sid Ahmad member of the Communist Party)?”, *SudaneseOnline*, dated from 30 October 2005 to 22 November 2005 <https://sudaneseonline.com/board/68/msg/-1166771203> (last accessed on 18 October 2023).

injustice, his denunciation of the oppression of the authoritarian regimes and the despair of people driven to personal tragedy by the political situation and economic needs. According to the journalist Mahfuz Bashra,

Mustafa had such a strong influence on his listeners that not listening to his songs was at one time considered a 'cultural shortcoming' among young people. In the few years following his death, the creator of 'Uncle 'Abd al-Rahim' turned into a symbol, and listening to him became a meaningful act [...]. It was enough for someone to say: 'I hear Mustafa', to describe his way of life in just three words.³¹

People also began using shirts similar to those he wore and imitated his hairstyle.

One example of the type of resistance lyrics he set to music is *al-Hajj Wad al-Ajabna*. The text is set at some time during the Islamic government, when a curfew was in place. It tells the story of aged man famous in his community for his generosity and wisdom, who one day received a guest at a late hour. When the man realised that there was no dinner left, he decided to leave the house to search for bread in the bakery next to his house, in spite of the fact that the hour of the curfew had passed. Caught by the police, he spent the night in jail, to be tried on the following day. When his family went to meet him at the court, they assisted to a horrible scene: the old man was sentenced to hard whipping. The punishment was carried out in front of his family and his people, who stared astonished.³² The wounds hurt his body as much as his spirit, broke his dignity and dishonoured him, and he succumbed to his injuries.

Another example, perhaps one of the masterpieces of his repertoire, is 'Amm 'Abd al-Rahim, Uncle 'Abd al-Rahim'.³³ The lyrics were written by the poet and his long-time collaborator Muhammad Hassan Salim Himmadi (1956–2012), another well-known leftist opposition public figure who was persecuted by the Nimeiri and Bashir regimes and went into exile. The song recounts the death in a train accident of a peasant, 'Abd al-Rahim, who has been ruined by the economic situation. This almost 15-min-long song focuses on the few hours before his death, and is a sort of stream of consciousness inside 'Abd al-Rahim's head, so that we follow his thoughts, feelings and memories before the accident. He remembers his happier past when he was a farmer. He looks at his family in despair: in spite of all his love and efforts, he has failed to give them any form of basic comfort.

³¹ Mahfuz Bashra, "Sid Ahmad wa 'Abd al-Aziz, Fi Dhikra al-Sawtayn (Sid Ahmad and 'Abd al-Aziz. In memory of the two voices)," *Alaraby*, 17 January 2015, <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/> نيتي وتوصل الى ركذ-يف زي زعل ادب عودم حادي (last accessed on 18 October 2023).

³² See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=11aIWLnUAP4> (last accessed on 18 October 2023). The text is available here: <https://www.facebook.com/MstfySydAhmdWbs/posts/488877364458652/> (last accessed on 18 October 2023).

³³ See <https://www.sm3na.com/audio/9f8259f0f167or> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RJ-LKQkNGhc> (last accessed on 18 October 2023). The translation here has been recomposed as best as possible from the excellent and poetic translation of the original poem made by Adil Babikir (2019: 80–7). Beside his work, a very useful resource for the translation of the song can be found here: <https://sudanese arabic documentariestranscriptionsandtranslations.wordpress.com/2024/04/10/uncle-abdur-raheem-1-3/> (last accessed on 22 September 2024).

He observes his children's worn-out clothes, and knows that his wife will have to mend them once again, when they really just need new ones. He thinks about his marriage, where no tenderness and warmth is left under the weight of constant preoccupations. While he is thinking about all of this on a cart pulled by a tired donkey, he is so lost in thought that he fails to hear the sound of the train coming towards him. When he realises, it is too late, and the train kills him. Here is an extract from the lyrics:

Uncle 'Abd al-Rahim...	عم عبد الرحيم
As a farmer, you were your own master	كُنتَ فلاح في يوم
Free to sleep ... free to get up at leisure	في إيدك تنوم.. على كيفك تقوم
No attendance sheets, no meal break	لا دفتر حضور.. لا حصّة فطور
Free to water your land in the moonlight ... and plough under the stars	تزرع بالقمر.. تفرع بي النجوم
But time is a wheel in perpetual spin	لكن الزمن.. دوّار.. آ.. يذوم
[...] You have nothing left but a few date palms	كل السقتو ما باقى على التمر [...]
And your land lay fallow	وأرضك راقدى بور
No new seeds to sow ... No pump on the run	لا تيراب وصل.. لا بابور يدور
And the wages are nothing	الماهية أفت
You live from hand to mouth	عيشة هاك.. وكف
Spit on you! Miserable of a world!	فى هذا الزمن.. ثف يادنيا.. ثف
Oh bearer of hardship	يقشلا دبعل اي
You never complained	ما اتعوذ شكى
Even if destitution weights heavily upon you...	لكن الكفاف فوقك.. منتكى
Your condition pleases nobody	حالك ما بتسر
But some people surpass you in patience	إلى كمان فى ناس فايثاك بى الصبر
People who live in rented dwellings... no land ... no date trees of their own	ساكنين بى الإيجار.. لا طين.. لا تمر
And people who even though they wanted to rent a place... could not get any shelter	وواحدين بى الإيجار.. ما لاقين جحر
What you can trade is your body and your pouring sweat	مبلعثم الضراع.. والعرق البخر
City workers	عمال المدن
Gangs of dockers	كلات الموانى
Sun-scorched	الغيش التعانى
Sailors	بحارة السفن
Cane cutters	حشاشة القصب
Cotton pickers	لقاطة القطن
Rope hawkers	الجالبة الحبال

The bakers	الفطن الفُرن
Fused by oven flames	الشغلانتو نار
And a blazing weather	والجو كيف سُخُن
What a life ... and how many people to feed	عيشن كمهو.. وديشن هان قُدر
And here are the well-heeled	وناساً حالا زين
Clusters of factories	مصنع.. مصنعين
Farmsteads-expensive swathes	طين في طين.. ووين
No worries	ما مرابا مُر.. بارد همها
No beads of sweat on foreheads, No frown on faces	لا يعرق جبين.. ولا وشأ يصُدر

The song is a beloved masterpiece of contemporary Sudanese music, and was—and remains—a symbol of the oppression under which the working classes lived and continue to live. Through a very touching personal story sung in the form of a poem, at times elliptical but with a very clear underlying message, the song is a ferocious denunciation not only of government injustice, but also of class differences and, reading between the lines, of the racial discrimination suffered by workers.³⁴

Mahjoub Sharif

Both Muhammad Wardi and Mustafa Sid Ahmed are linked to a third figure in the culture of the left, Mahjoub Sharif (1948–2014), a Sudanese writer and poet, several of whose poems they set to music.

Mahjoub Sharif was born in a rural area of Gezira, but grew up in Omdurman in a relatively poor family of small traders who did not have the chance to pay for higher education for him. Like the other two, he trained as a schoolteacher, in his case at the elementary level, a work that became a passion in his life (Ille, 2015; Rajab, 1980).³⁵ At some point in the 1960s, he joined the Communist Party and became active in the teachers' union, and his literary skills began to bloom during the October Revolution of 1964. He supported Nimeiri's rise to power but swiftly became opposed to the regime. To an even greater degree than the other two artists I have discussed so far, he became a target of persecution by the

³⁴This famous song has been sung by a number of other artists, one of whom is Nancy Ajaj, whose beautiful version can be found here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LOddHKM-FOoY> (last accessed on 18 October 2023).

³⁵His experimental pedagogic methods are also an important aspect of his work, but remain understudied. See also Magdi El Gizouli, "Mahjoub Sharif: A Secular Prophet," *Sudan Tribune*, 4 April 2014, <https://www.sudantribune.com/spip.php?article50527> (last accessed on 18 October 2023).

regime. He was accused of plotting against the government, and sacked from his school and imprisoned from 1971 to 1973, then again between 1973 and 1974. In 1976, he was arrested during his honeymoon and remained in prison for two years. He was arrested for a fourth time in 1979. By 1996, he had been imprisoned ten times for periods ranging from a few months to three years (Ille, 2015: 118) under extremely harsh conditions that led to his health deteriorating and his death in 2014.

This level of persecution was a direct result of Mahjoub’s poetry. He was renowned for his compositions and performances during his times in prison, and the ties he was able to form with his fellow prisoners and prison warders. Witnesses have reported that his very presence changed the atmosphere of despair and desolation into one of pride and resistance (Mahjoub 1991). Even when he was forbidden to have pencils and paper, he managed to write using any means he could find. One of his most famous poems was smuggled out of prison on a *jallabiya* (a traditional Sudanese garment) woven by one of the prisoners, who was a tailor. However, in most cases, the inmates simply learnt the verses by heart and then spread them when they left prison.³⁶

His poems were written in colloquial Sudanese Arabic, using language that was simultaneously simple and direct, but also powerful, and designed to be understood by everybody. His repertoire was extremely varied, going from nursery rhymes to revolutionary hymns, but he also wrote plays and children’s stories. His themes were not just political; they remained close to daily life and the everyday difficulties faced by the Sudanese, such as masons at work suffering beneath the beating sun and an overwhelmed mother’s attentiveness towards her child.³⁷

I will give just three examples of his poems out of an output that includes hundreds, if not thousands, of texts. The first is entitled *Khartoum*. Information on where and when it was published is not available to me, but it is included in a text written by Mahjoub Sharif for Amnesty International in 1991, when this organisation made an international plea for his release from yet another spell in prison (Sherif, 1991: 4).³⁸

Here she comes, Khartoum
Awake, awakening and ever-sleepless
Boiling, turmoiling and anguish [sic]
Angry she comes

³⁶ Ille (2015) quotes several anecdotes about Mahjoub’s life in prison.

³⁷ Nahla Mahmoud, “A Tribute to Legendary Sudanese Poet Mahjoub Sharif (1948–2014): A Story of Love, Hope and Being,” *OpenDemocracy*, 1 May 2014, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/north-africa-west-asia/tribute-to-legendary-sudanese-poet-mahjoub-sharif-19482014-story-of-lov/> (last accessed on 18 October 2023).

³⁸ The Amnesty International publication does not include the original Arabic language of these poems. I have used the spelling “Sharif” here as it is the closest to the written form in Arabic (in which the vowel “e” does not exist); however, in the publication he authored in English he chose the spelling “Sherif”, hence the discrepancy.

Khartoum
Storms of dust and heat.

Another example from the same publication by Sharif (1991: 5) is *Born Are the Beautiful Children*:

Born are the beautiful children, hour by hour
With brightest eyes,
And loving hearts you have bestowed upon
Fatherland, they will come
For bullets aren't the seeds of life.

But perhaps the best known and most beloved poem in his repertoire is *Ya Walda Ya Maryam*, “Oh My Mother Maryam”. In this poem, which was written in the early 1970s, he imagines that he is speaking to his mother, who had managed to travel to visit him in a prison in a very remote village in Western Sudan in which he was detained after the counter-coup of 1971. So many people were arrested that the main prisons became overcrowded, and even old and very peripheral detention centres had to be reopened to find room for political prisoners. In this poem, he tells his mother:

[...] Oh mother Maryam	يا والدة يا مريم [...]
I was not a disobedient son...	ماني الوليد العاق
I have not betrayed, I am not a thief	لا خنت لا سراق ...
And the separatist soldier who wishes	والعسكري الفراق
To separate your heart from me	بين قلبك الساساق
Is the one who should regret that	وبيني هو البندم
... his desire won't be realised	والدايرو ما بنتم ...
Mother, Maryam	يا والدة يا مريم
I know your tenderness for me, I beg you to hold me tight	عارف حنانك لي راجيك تلولينني
You always carry me, and in your eyes you put me	دايماً تقيليني وفي العين تشيليني
In the midnight, your heart warms me	ألقاه عز الليل قلبك يديفيني
Your shadow	ضلك
Is all over me, during my whole life	عليّ مشرور قيلت في سنييني
If you know me, if you know my sufferings	أنا لو تعرفيني لو تعرفي الفيني
How much I love you, how much	أنا كم بحبك كم
And the separatist soldier who wishes	والعسكري الفراق
To separate your heart from me	بين قلبك الساساق
Is the one who should regret that	وبيني هو البندم
... his desire won't be realised	والدايرو ما بنتم ...
Oh mother Maryam	يا والدة يا مريم

All day and night I carried you in my eyes	طول النهار والليل في عيني شايك شيل
However, I won't surrender	لكني شادي
Have no fear for me,	الحيل لا خوف عليّ لا هم
Here's my heart for you, as a tissue	هاك قلبي ليك منديل الدمعة
For your tears to drop	لما تسيل قشبيها
Oh Maryam [...]	[...] يا مريم

The Nimeiri and Bashir's regimes harassed the artist to equal degrees, but he always refused to go into exile. According to Ahmed Rajab, who wrote an article to plea for his release from prison in 1980, Nimeiri was so paranoid about Mahjoub Sharif that he saw danger in all his compositions, and even his most romantic songs were banned (Rajab, 1980: 23). It was this subversive simplicity that made his poetry so disturbing to both the regimes of Nimeiri and Bashir but turned Sharif into a “hero” of the left.

Even his death became an anti-government event. Knowing that he was on his deathbed, hundreds of thousands of people came to his house to be with him during his last moments and to accompany him to the cemetery. They walked for six miles to be with him until the very last moment. His funeral was not attended by any official representatives, as he had made it clear that nobody from the government should be present.³⁹

Conclusion

The aim of this chapter has been to make a number of points by drawing brief portraits of three Sudanese icons of resistance. First, I have sought to indicate the role of songs and poetry as indispensable sources for understanding political life at the grassroots, especially when associated with biographies. In all three cases, an extraordinary musical or literary talent went together with a life spent as an outspoken critic of authoritarian rule, a position these artists adopted in the form of music or literary texts; their fame was related to their art as much as their uncompromising attitude towards power. The connections between politics, resistance and musical history make it possible to understand how forms of opposition were kept alive in spite of the harshest repressions. Revolutionary songs such as *Green October* evoked images of the 1964 revolution, and thus enhanced the pride and sense of empowerment of people, as they showed that the Sudanese had succeeded in overthrowing unjust governments many times in the past (as the memory of

³⁹Abdulkhalig Elsir, “A Tribute to the Sudanese People’s Poet, Mahjoub Shareef (1943–2014)”, *The Gazelle*, 22 May 2014, <https://ausudmediaproject.wordpress.com/2014/05/22/a-tribute-to-the-sudanese-peoples-poet-mahjoub-shareef-1943-2014/> (last accessed on 18 October 2023).

1964 recalled more ancient struggles such as the battle against colonialism in the 1950s or the 1924 revolution). Others like *Uncle ‘Abd al-Rahim* or *Oh Mother Maryam* described current injustices, and reminded their listeners that nobody should become accustomed to oppression. Singing them in private settings or among small circles of people helped create spaces of freedom and foster imaginaries of a better future. Also, many people had heard or read these songs or texts during their childhood, sometimes recited by their parents or family members, and so they linked memories of resistance to feelings. This highly emotional reservoir of imaginaries of protest has been systematically mobilised in various episodes of resistance. One case in point is 2019, when witness present during the protests have reported to me that historical revolutionary songs as *Green October* were heard again and many texts by Sharif were read aloud or recited during sits-in and marches.⁴⁰

Second, this study has attempted to tackle a more specific problem of Sudanese historiography—the question of the resilience of the left. As I mentioned in the introduction, generations of artists on the left were persecuted by both the Nimeiri and Bashir regimes. The lives of these three artists are examples of a much wider battle that the last two regimes in particular fought against the left in all its forms, one that went far beyond harassing artists. And yet, this very repression is what turned them into popular heroes. This helps us understand the contribution made by leftist artists in creating, but above all keeping alive—left-wing imaginaries. By their art, they affected broad categories of people, including those who were not interested in or sensitive to open political affiliations. Left-wing artists provided a terminology, an ideological register on which to draw, and a certain kind of social imaginary that expressed not only resistance to authoritarian rule, but also the importance of sharing, mutual reliance, equality and brotherhood and the need to overcome differences in terms of origins and class.

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⁴⁰ As in this example of *Oh Mother Mariam* here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UsdHMH-pdyQc> (last accessed on 18 October 2023).

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Somali Biography and Autobiography in the Twentieth Century



Lee Cassanelli

Abstract In addition to humanizing the history of the continent, African biographies and autobiographies can help shed light on the extent to which local actors are perceived, or perceive themselves, as active agents in the shaping of larger historical events. The emergence of distinct genres of personal narrative in different societies at different moments in time offers insights into prevailing local notions of individual vs. collective agency and into ideas about the roles and responsibilities of individuals under particular historical circumstances. Section one of this essay offers a preliminary survey of the scattered biographical and autobiographical sources available to scholars of twentieth-century Somalia and explores why these forms of narrative appear to be so rare in the historical record. Section two describes how Somalia's state collapse and civil wars after 1990 generated new genres of personal memoir writing, political biography, and semi-autobiographical fiction. In examining these developments, the essay speculates on the possible links between autobiography and the emergence of new subjectivities within Somalia's body politic both within the country and in the wider Somali diaspora.

Keywords Somali autobiography · Colonial literature · Diaspora biographies · Somali orature · Trauma literature

Introduction

Among Irma Taddia's manifold contributions to the historiography of northeast Africa have been her efforts to call our attention to the value of biographies and autobiographies as sources for twentieth-century African history (Taddia, 1996, 2005, 2017). In thinking about these genres from my perspective as an historian of Somalia, I began to wonder why Somalis had produced so few personal memoirs or autobiographies during the colonial period, and why until very recently almost no biographies of prominent Somalis have featured in scholarly writing on the country.

L. Cassanelli (✉)

University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, USA

e-mail: lcassane@sas.upenn.edu

The first part of this essay therefore offers a preliminary survey of the sources available to historians who seek biographical information on the lives of individual Somalis over the past century or so. It notes the very limited range of written or orally recorded biographical material of any sort about Somalis and explores why autobiographies in particular were not deployed by Somalia's Western-educated political elites as a form of nationalist mobilization as they typically were elsewhere in twentieth-century Africa. The second part of the essay describes how, following the outbreak of Somalia's civil war in 1990–91, a handful of Somalis began to publish personal diaries, memoirs, and autobiographies, and soon thereafter academic scholars began to discover the value of biographies and life-histories for their own work. In examining these trends, the essay speculates on the possible links between autobiography and post-state Somali politics, both at the individual and collective levels. On the one hand, the emergence of the personal memoir was clearly a response to the trauma of war and displacement and a sign of the increasing willingness of Somali intellectuals to reflect both personally and publicly on the fortunes of their homeland. At the same time, the emergence of written biographies and autobiographies seemed to reflect new interest in these genres on the part of Somalia's growing diaspora communities, of a number of international publishers, and of contemporary political entrepreneurs on the Somali scene. It appears that Somalia's dual crises of state and society gave impetus to new forms of Somali self-expression and subjectivity and that the collapse of the Somali state triggered something of a post-national Somali literary renaissance which continues to this day.

This essay focuses primarily on written material in English, French, and Italian, leaving aside potentially valuable biographical material in Arabic as well as the growing body of fiction by Somali writers which more often than not is semi-autobiographical in nature. In addition, there almost certainly exist some unpublished biographies or autobiographies in the Somali language, although Andrzejewski's (1985) comprehensive review of written Somali literature up to 1980 cited only a handful of Somali literary works which contained significant biographical material, and Dhir (2005) valuable 2005 survey of Somali literary forms does not consider biography.¹

Section One: Biographies of Somalis, 1880–1990

Apart from the Islamic hagiographical literature in Arabic—which can be a valuable source for writing precolonial social and intellectual history, as Reese (1999) has recently demonstrated—we find few documents before the turn of the twentieth century which provide us with details on the lives of noteworthy Somali individuals. Nineteenth-century European travelers did occasionally mention influential Somali merchants or clan leaders whom they encountered during their journeys (Ferrandi,

¹ However, Andrzejewski's article (1985) does contain his own brief biographical notes on some four dozen noted Somali poets and playwrights.

1903: 279–80; Robecchi-Brichetti, 1899: 200–7). Then, with the onset of European rule in the early twentieth century, the colonial archives began to yield brief descriptions of prominent local personalities whose support the authorities sought out or whose opposition they feared (e.g., Carletti, 1910; Sorrentino, 1910).² These brief sketches scarcely qualify as biographies. But as I discovered during my initial field research in southern Somalia in the 1970s, elderly informants were frequently able to recall local lore about these same individuals, thus corroborating their importance as actors at the time of the Italian occupation of the country (Cassanelli, 1982).

Not surprisingly, the more potentially disruptive a Somali figure was in the eyes of the colonial authorities, the more likely we are to find information about him in the colonial record. For example, periodic intelligence reports provide us with glimpses into the activities of Haji Abdi Abiker Gafle, the purported instigator of Biimaal resistance to the Italian garrison at the coastal town of Marka (Cassanelli, 1982: 226–7); of Nassib Bunda, the ambitious ex-slave and self-proclaimed Sultan who alternatively aided and obstructed Italian penetration of the lower Jubba region until his death in 1908 (Cassanelli, 1987: 226–31); and of Omar Samatar, who led a mutiny of Somali soldiers at the military outpost of El Bur in 1926 and subsequently harassed colonial forces from across the Ethiopian border (De Vecchi, 1935). Pieced together with surviving oral recollections from their communities, the archival documents help to briefly illuminate the lives of some of the colonial regime's most obstinate opponents.

The one individual who captured the attention of all the colonial powers in the Horn during the first two decades of the twentieth century was Muhammed Abdullah Hassan (hereafter MAH). Known as the 'Mad Mullah' to a generation of British readers, and as the 'Sayyid' (a title designating a learned descendant of the Prophet Muhammed) to his Somali supporters, MAH (1859–1920) pursued a 21-year guerilla campaign against the British, Italian, and Ethiopian forces which sought to carve out portions of the Somali territories for their respective empires. The Sayyid built his resistance on multiple foundations. He used traditional military and marriage alliances in efforts to unite the feuding clans of Somaliland in common cause against the foreign invaders. As an adept and later *khalifa* (local representative) of the Salahiya Sufi Order in the Horn, he invoked Islam to rally Somalis against the Christian 'infidels,' urging his followers to call themselves *darawiish* (dervishes) rather than identifying as members of specific clans. Finally, as a gifted poet—a craft esteemed by Somalis then as today—he left a rich body of oral poetry, both religious and profane, which is still widely admired and recited by aficionados of classical Somali oratory.

The charismatic 'Mullah' impressed his contemporaries sufficiently to prompt a wealth of oral and written literature about him. Apart from his own poetry, which could frequently be scathing when directed toward the foreign infidels or his local

² More detailed intelligence information on suspected Somali rebels can be found in the Archivio storico dell'ex Ministero dell'Africa italiana, at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Rome; and one suspects that Ethiopian officials in the Ogaden region also gathered intelligence about influential or troublesome local leaders in their districts.

rivals, a number of his supporters composed oral verses praising his leadership and military prowess. Somali poets from rival clans also targeted him in their verses, producing polemics that continued to resonate in the oral tradition of later generations (Sheikh-Abdi, 1993; Samatar, 1982). The ‘Mullah’ was also the main subject of at least a half dozen popular books written by Europeans during or just after his lifetime, and later scholars explored his personality and political philosophy by drawing upon the rich corpus of oral poetry he left behind (Sheikh-Abdi 1993; Caroselli, 1931; Drake-Brockman, 1912; Jardine, 1923; McNeill, 1902; Slight, 2010).

There is little question that the life of Muhammed Abdullah Hassan is one of the few from the early years of the twentieth century for which ample biographical evidence is available. In addition to the aforementioned poetry by and about him, the Sayyid maintained an active diplomatic correspondence with his Arab and European contemporaries, and so we have letters (written originally in Arabic) to provide insight into his motives and political strategies. Given his volatile and sometimes divisive leadership, there is no shortage of viewpoints on the dervish leader’s life and legacies. The possibilities for an in-depth treatment of this complex individual are well-illustrated in the 1984 historical/literary study (published in Italian) by Keenadiid (1984), who was trained in linguistics and classics in Italy and had earlier (Keenadiid, 1976) produced the first comprehensive Somali dictionary using the new Somali orthography. Keenadiid’s rich study is really a multiple biography, since it deals as much with the lives of the author’s own ancestors (the *boqors* or Sultans of Obbia and Majerteen) as it does with that of the Sayyid. It includes a substantial selection of oral historical poetry directed against MAH, even as it brings to light previously unpublished compositions by the dervish leader himself. Keenadiid’s was also the first Somali account in a European language of the Majerteen “royal” family, wrapped in a book with a title that was certainly less provocative than its contents: *Ina Cabdille Xasan e la sua attivita letteraria* (Keenadiid, 1984).

The figure of MAH has had a long and dramatic afterlife. With the rise of modern nationalism following World War II, the Sayyid’s 21-year resistance struggle became enshrined as a central episode in the Somali national narrative. For many Somalis, he was the “father of the nation” whose ultimate defeat did not detract from his initial vision of a Somali people united across clan lines. Under the authoritarian regime (1969–91) of Mohamed Siyad Barre, the prestigious Somali Academy in Mogadishu actively promoted the production of works extolling the resistance leader’s struggle.³ More cynical observers saw the government’s campaign as an effort to legitimize the personal and clan agendas of the president. Like MAH, Siyad Barre’s Daarood clan ancestry included an Ogadeni mother, and so critics saw the head of state as equating his leadership role with that of the much-admired Sayyid. The regime’s overt efforts to put ‘Daaroodism’ at the center of Somalia’s nation building project prompted a surreptitious counter-campaign involving the dissemination of anti-Daarood—and hence anti-Siyad Barre—poetry (Ali Jimale Ahmed, 1996).

³ This of course meant that contemporary scholars had to expunge from the record the most vitriolic verses which the Sayyid had directed against rival clans, so that he could be portrayed as a unifier and not a divider of the Somalis.

To my knowledge, the only autobiography written by a Somali during the colonial era was a remarkable little manuscript brought to light in the 1970s by Richard Pankhurst (1977a, 1977b). It is the account of a poor shepherd boy, Ibrahim Ismaa'il, who like many of his northern Somali countrymen set off as a seaman and spent time between 1914s and the 1930s on merchant ships which docked in Aden, Lisbon, Liverpool, Galveston, Cardiff, and London. After retiring in Whiteway (UK), Ibrahim was befriended by a Belgian socialist who eventually persuaded him to write the story of his life along with the customs of his people. Ibrahim's straightforward and engaging narrative is a kind of biographical travelogue that many itinerant Somalis, both in colonial times and more recently, could doubtlessly have produced had they the time, inclination, and editorial assistance enjoyed by Ibrahim.

Perhaps the most surprising discovery in this survey was the paucity of biographies or autobiographies of the first generation of post-World War II Somali nationalists, those who helped lead Somalia to independence in 1960. Almost everywhere else in late colonial and early independent Africa, aspiring national leaders wrote or commissioned autobiographies in the colonial European language. Aimed at a literate and largely expatriate audience, these narratives served to situate the authors as 'founding fathers' in the story of their new nations' independence (Holden, 2008). In Somalia, no such autobiographies appeared. Nor did I find any evidence that western-educated Somalis at the time sought to document the lives of their country's most prominent political figures.⁴

Arabic sources are somewhat richer. Short biographies of the first President and first Prime Minister of the independent Somali Republic were published in Arabic by the Ministry of Information in Mogadishu in 1963 (Hamdi Sayyid Salim, 1963a, 1963b), while sketches of the fifteen founders of the Somali Youth Club (later Somali Youth League) appeared in an Arabic pamphlet published in 1967 by the same ministry (Jama' Umar 'Issa, 1965).⁵ One possible explanation is that levels of literacy among Somalis were higher in Arabic than in either Italian or English at the time of independence, and so written biographies in Arabic could anticipate a larger audience. Moreover, religiously educated Somalis were already familiar with the existing tradition of Islamic hagiographic literature.⁶ Still, one must wonder whether there was sufficient interest in the Italian or British metropolises to warrant the publication of similar biographies in European languages for Western audiences.

With the military coup of 1969 and the establishment of a socialist ideological apparatus, there was a predictable increase in official state publications. This reached into the area of culture as well as economic planning, although the State Printing Press never seemed to have enough capacity to publish all the fiction and history that Somali authors were producing in the newly adopted Somali script. In addition to the

⁴ See Section Two of this essay for more recent political biographies of the country's 'founding fathers'.

⁵ I am grateful to Mohamed H. Mukhtar for this information (see also Mohamed Haji Mukhtar 1987).

⁶ It is also possible that the Arabic publications were subsidized by the Egyptian government, which was trying to exert influence on the religious politics of early independent Somalia, though I have no direct evidence for this at the moment.

attempts to propagate an official history of the Somali nation, the state also sponsored efforts to prepare brief biographies of prominent Somalis for school textbooks. It was widely rumored that President Siyad Barre had created a committee of scholars in the late 1970s—a few years after his stunning defeat in the Ogaden war with Ethiopia—to help prepare his own official biography. Though it appears that the committee's members conducted and recorded interviews with friends and associates of the President over a period of several years, the projected presidential biography never appeared. The story behind this aborted project has yet to be fully told,⁷ though it does appear to anticipate a personal political use of biography previously absent in Somali public life.

In sum, the biographical literature for Somalia in the twentieth century is extremely scanty. While the few examples cited here provide us with fragments of Somali lives in Western languages, the overall production of 'Western-style' biographies is minimal and in no way rivals the number of religious hagiographies which continued to be printed (in Arabic) for an Islamic popular readership. The explanations we can offer at this point are terribly mundane: a country with few resources and (in the 1950s and 1960s) a relatively small urban population; a tiny Western-educated elite too limited to serve as a potential audience; and a culture where orature continued to provide the primary mode of individual and collective expression even in the growing urban centers of the country. I will return to the relationship between oral and written autobiography in Section Two below.

Section Two: Memoirs and Biographies in the 1990s...and After

Following the collapse of the Somali state and the outbreak of the Somali civil war in 1991, a small number of personal memoirs—published in Somali, English, or Italian—began to appear for the first time. Particularly noteworthy were those produced by former Somali ministers or diplomats who had served at one time or another in the Siyad Barre government and fled the country after the regime's demise. Several of the officials appear to have kept diaries, and it is possible that some had already begun to draft their memoirs. Their publication in the wake of state collapse seemed to reflect the authors' anguish at the fate of the nation and perhaps equally served to help distance them from their prior associations with the discredited regime (Dualeh, 1994; Ghalib, 1995; Mohamed Aden Sheikh, 1991; Mohamed Osman Omar, 1992). Unlike accounts by journalists and other eyewitnesses at the onset of the civil war (e.g., Hassan, 1993; Gasseem, 1994; Afrah, 1993), the personal reflections by former ambassadors M. O. Omar and H. A. Dualeh and civil servants M. A. Sheikh and J. M. Ghalib—whatever the political biases of each—sought to position their authors as inside observers of (and authoritative commentators on) the

⁷ Information provided by Ali Jimale Ahmed, who for a time chaired the committee.

events which led to the collapse of the state. A somewhat different type of autobiography also appeared in the early course of the civil war; its author was the so-called warlord Mohamed Farah Aidid, who had given multiple interviews to an editor while serving as Somalia's ambassador to India in the late 1980s and who subsequently authorized their publication in his quest to establish himself as a potential national leader during the struggle for control of the post-Siyad state (Ruhela, 1994).

The motives, agendas, and biases of these authors differ considerably, and it is not my purpose here to review each of them individually. Rather I want to reflect on what their publication collectively can tell us about the emergence of Somali memoir writing at this particular moment in the history of the nation and its diaspora. The personal reflections made public for the first time in the 1990s were clearly something new in Somalia's literary history; and in the subsequent two decades the trend to autobiographical narrative—in both non-fictional and fictional forms—has only continued to accelerate.

To explain the emergence of autobiographical narratives in the wake of Somalia's state collapse, we need to recall the historical circumstances of the 1990s. While some Somali poets and a handful of foreign observers were by the late 1980s predicting the end of Siyad Barre's increasingly brittle regime (Dhir, 1994), no one fully anticipated the complete disintegration of the country's central government, civil service, and national army, nor the extensive communal violence which erupted in 1991 and continued intermittently for several years. The steady flight of elite politicians and businessmen to Kenya and overseas which began in the 1980s became a mass exodus with the onset of civil war, while tens of thousands of displaced civilians sought sanctuary in refugee camps beyond Somalia's borders in Kenya and Ethiopia, or in Europe or the Middle East.⁸ This extensive Somali diaspora would only continue to grow as violence persisted over much of the country through the following decade.

Clearly, the demise of the Somali central government and the failure to restore a functional replacement put former government officials out of work, and—for those who managed to escape the turmoil—gave them the opportunity to reflect and to write. Financial need coupled with the urge to dissociate themselves from the fallen government provided further incentive. As new Somali émigré and refugee communities sprang up in cities like Toronto, Atlanta, and Oslo—augmenting older established diasporas in the UK, Italy, and Kenya—the audience for 'insider' accounts of the country's collapse grew rapidly. Somalia's diaspora communities frequently helped support the authors financially⁹ and subsequently provided the bulk of the readership for the new memoirs. International publishers saw a ready market for first-hand accounts of the breakdown of Somalia's governance or for exposés of the

⁸ An estimated two million Somalis fled to neighboring countries or overseas between 1990 and 2010, representing some twenty percent of the country's total population.

⁹ For example, Jama Mohamed Ghalib (1995: xvi) acknowledges the "Somali friends who prefer not to be named but who gave me generous financial contributions without which I would not have been able to conclude the task of writing this book [...]".

fallen regime, and so encouraged the new publications, as did a handful of small independent publishers.¹⁰

It is important to reiterate that before 1990 Somali autobiographical writing was virtually unknown. To my knowledge, the first modern Somali autobiography was published—perhaps not surprisingly—in French in 1984 by the Djibouti activist Omar Osman Rabeh (1984), who incidentally had managed to obtain a Ph.D. in Philosophy while spending seven years in a French prison for his anti-colonial activities. Prior to this, only the anglophone Somali novelist Nuruddin Farah had sought to individualize and ‘subjectivize’ the experience of life under the Barre regime through his fictional characters, most notably in his trilogy *Variations on the Theme of an African Dictatorship*.¹¹ Later, in the course of the Somali crisis, efforts to interview and record the experiences of Somali victims of violence on the ground produced many poignant personal accounts—of both men and women—though these were generally solicited by outside researchers and so cannot be considered as self-produced life-histories (e.g., Gardner and Bushra 2004). As a result, from the viewpoint of an outsider who has observed forms of Somali self-expression over time, there was something unquestionably novel about the emergence of a series of individually authored, personally engaged, and semi-autobiographical memoirs.

Perhaps the novelty of this new genre can best be appreciated by a digression into Somalia’s well-known oral poetic tradition, which has long been the preferred form of commentary on social and political affairs among Somalis. One can certainly find precedents for individual authorship in the traditional Somali oral repertoire. That is, oral poems—especially the classical genres of *gabay*, *geraar*, and *jiifo*—have always been attributed to specific Somali artists, whom audiences could readily recognize even when the poem came to be recited by another performer (which was typically the case as noteworthy compositions circulated through the country) (Andrzejewski & Lewis, 1964; Johnson, 2006).¹²

At the same time, the most prestigious genres of Somali oral poetry typically dealt with issues of clan prestige and politics, so their messages tended to reflect the collective outlook of the poets’ clan relatives. Poets were expected to convey, in eloquent and memorable verse, their kinsmen’s views in matters of war and peace, alliance and rupture, oppression and liberation. Reputable poets were also tasked with responding to verbal attacks of poets from rival clans, thus making them defenders of their clan’s honor and reputation. Clan traditions recall numerous occasions when

¹⁰ Special mention must be made of London’s Haan Associates, founded and directed by the late Anita S. Adam, who operated on a shoestring budget to provide Somalis with an outlet for their writing. In addition to the reminiscences of former ambassador M. O. Omar, Haan Associates published nearly three dozen titles between 1990 and 2011, including work by young Somali authors as well as established foreign scholars (John Drysdale, I. M. Lewis), along with dictionaries and educational materials for Somali youth living in the UK.

¹¹ For an overview see Moolla (2020).

¹² Unlike the case of many oral epic traditions, including those of classical Greece and Rome, whose creators were typically anonymous while the performers were often familiar and identifiable, the authors of Somali classical poems were named and recognized, while their poems could be recited by anyone with a good memory and performance skills.

a poet's eloquence stirred his kinsmen collectively to action, often by persuading reluctant members to take up arms for the good of the entire community (Samatar, 1982). Sometimes the poet's role was to calm the waters with verses to remind his listeners how rash actions in the past had damaged the clan's solidarity or material well-being. But even where a poet might occasionally challenge the prevailing sentiments of the moment or seek to persuade clan leaders to consider a different course of action than the one being contemplated, the poet ultimately emerged as a spokesman for his community. As the Somalis saying goes, "when an outsider hears the viewpoint of one member of clan 'x', he understands the position of the entire clan".

Beyond recognizing that collective wisdom is better than that of any single individual's—"a lone man knows no solution; (but) a council knows it" says another proverb—Somali custom discouraged individuals from publicly voicing any opinions which might be construed as critical of their own clansmen. Dissenting openly from the clan consensus could undermine group solidarity considered essential for survival. While it was perfectly acceptable for an individual to speak his mind within the clan assembly (*shir*), to the outside world the poet (like the politician) was first and foremost a representative of the clan. To promote one's personal views outside the circle of kin was considered unseemly and even arrogant. By seeking to elevate his own individual opinion above that of the collective, a poet—like an autobiographer, perhaps—opened himself to charges of hubris and self-importance. One is reminded of the typically blunt traditional Somali proverb, "a man that praises himself is like a goat that suckles itself".

In this light, the appearance of personal memoirs following the outbreak of civil war in 1990 signaled an important break with the established culture of 'author as spokesman for the group.' Indeed, the autobiographical works which appeared in the wake of the Somali civil war appear to share more with the modern novelist than with the traditional poet, in so far as their authors did not purport to be speaking as clansmen but rather as individuals concerned with the fate of their nation as a whole. Ambassador M. O. Omar states in the Preface to his memoir, "[a] large part of my narration is based on my *personal observations*"¹³ and asks in his Postscript "[do we ever dare admit our own mistakes or evaluate our history objectively?]" (Mohamed Osman Omar, 1992: 10, 206). Ismail A. Ismail claims "I tried my level best in this book to be objective [...]. I have not therefore shied away from calling the clans by their names; instead of the usual indirect reference, I thought I should call a spade a spade, in the interest of clarity [...]. I have told the story *from my perspective*—what I have seen, observed and lived through" (Ismail Ali Ismail, 2010: viii).¹⁴

These claims of *objectivity*—based ironically on the authors' subjectivity as individual observers—do not mean, of course, that the authors' viewpoints were viewed by other Somalis as theirs and theirs alone. Somali audiences tend to assume that even educated or cosmopolitan or *detrribalized* individuals continue to speak and write as members of their natal clans, and that their sentiments or prescriptions are invariably

¹³ Emphasis by the author.

¹⁴ Emphasis by the author.

informed by their clan affiliations and agendas. In the immediate circumstances of the civil war and its prolonged aftermath, there was no such thing as a neutral observer or an independently derived intellectual position (Ingiriis, 2016). Even amongst Somalis in the diaspora, clan-based narratives of victory or victimhood continued to inform discourses in teashops or on the internet, perpetuating what M. H. Ingiriis (*ibidem*), following Richard Werbner, calls a “post-conflict memory crisis”.¹⁵ Thus, even while outside observers like the present author may view the emergence of the personal memoir as marking a rupture with the author-as-clan-spokesman tradition, many Somali readers continued to regard these works as little more than modern forms of partisan propaganda, whose authors manipulated memories to serve their own clan’s interests.

It turns out that the handful of memoirs which appeared in the 1990s was only the beginning of a literary trend whose trajectory we can only hint at here. In addition to more recent autobiographical accounts by former government officials (e.g., Ismail Ali Ismail, 2010; Mohamed Barud Ali, 2010; Haid, 2016), families or friends have worked to preserve the papers and tell the stories of other prominent individuals. Using personal diaries and interviews, Abdi Samatar (2016) sought to reconstruct the lives and times of what he calls *Africa’s First Democrats*, while other scholars continue to assemble and publish the reflections of notable political figures who lived through the independence struggle and the early decades of the Somali Republic (Hussen, 2021; Issa-Salwe, 2017). These efforts were likely driven by multiple motives—personal nostalgia, desire to set the record straight, and some genuine soul searching on why the national dream of a united Somalia collapsed in chaos. We should also not discount the desire of at least some of the memoirists to remind younger Somalis of what Somalia was like before the state collapsed.¹⁶ It is also important to note that the past three decades have also witnessed the blossoming of Somali fictional writing which is itself often semi-autobiographical, although much of the new fiction focuses on the experiences of migration, alienation, or fitful integration into the authors’ new host countries rather than on detailed recollections of life in Somalia (Lazzari, 2021).

As South African anthropologist Becker (2011: 322) notes in her review of recent books on the politics of memory in eastern and southern Africa, “the public telling of personal memory narratives [in South Africa’s TRC hearings] became a widely accepted form of personal and social catharsis, which extended to autobiographical and fictional literary texts”. Such personal “telling” in response to war and trauma may of course generate its own forms of myth-making and even reproduce divisions between “us and them” (Ingiriis, 2016). Nonetheless, the emergence of Somali

¹⁵ For Ingiriis (*ibidem*: 349), “the Somalis in the Diaspora are cooks in this sense as well as servers for their own oral discourses as they brought with them their conflicts for control over the State into their destinies of asylum in the West, conflicts that continue to shape their inward and outward outlooks”.

¹⁶ In the words of Ismail Ali Ismail (2010: vii–viii), “I believe young Somalis who have lost touch with the past of their country—and have a distorted view of it—should know what went wrong [...]. Connectivity between generations is very important, for, without it, continuity would be lost”.

memoirs and autobiographies does appear to mark a break with the tradition of collective representation and to project a new type of narrative subjectivity. While their authors do not abandon the Somali proclivity to blame many of the country's woes on foreign meddling—an analysis which, incidentally, is not without merit—these personal memoirs do acknowledge the responsibility of (some) Somali actors for tearing the country apart. As the authors attempt to grapple with the reasons for state failure, communal violence, and disrespect for established social institutions, they also convey a deep sense of anguish at the seeming loss of Somalis' unique collective identity. They project none of those attitudes of proud insularity and supreme confidence which once typified the Somali stance toward the outside world. I must reiterate here that such sentiments are rarely stated explicitly in any of the works discussed above; rather they represent my reading of what may well mark the onset of a new and sober realism on the part of Somali intellectuals who have been forced to confront a situation which was previously 'unthinkable'.

In his 1986 novel *Maps*, one of Nuruddin Farah's characters laments that, even after the failed Ogaden war had intensified the growing suspicion and mistrust among the country's dominant clans, "we [Somalis] decided, we would not raise these burning questions" (Farah, 1990: 240). After 1991, as battles raged for control over the neighborhoods of Mogadishu and rural Somalis saw their lands occupied and looted by armed militias, such 'burning questions' could no longer be ignored. By looking at the emergence of personal memoirs and biographies as forms of literary production in post-state Somalia, we can build on Irma's insights about the value of these genres, not simply as new evidence for reconstructing the past but also as vehicles for confronting that past and possibly coming to terms with it.¹⁷

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¹⁷ Somali authors who are best known by their surnames or nicknames are cited and alphabetized by those names. Otherwise, they are listed by first name followed by family surname(s).

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Biography, Ethnography and Education in Colonial Libya. Panetta's Papers at Florence State Archives



Silvia Bruzzi

Abstract Collected documents, working papers and the fieldnotes of scholars who worked in Africa, as well as their life trajectories presented through biographic and autobiographic writings, are a rich resource for the social history of Africa. This chapter draws from the personal archive of Ester Panetta (1894–1983), one of the first Italian anthropologists to work and live in Africa in the first half of the twentieth century. After her Arabic and colonial studies at the Oriental Institutes in Naples and in Paris, she lived in Libya until the outbreak of the Second World War, when she came back to Italy as a refugee from Italian Africa. Her ethnographic studies and personal writings, recently deposited at Florence State Archives, are a unique resource for a social history of Northeast Africa. Personal archives of scholars who devoted their life in studying African societies have a twofold interest for historians of Africa. From one side, they preserve documents that can be analysed to explore African societies. On the other hand, they are sources revealing the researcher's relationship with the Africanist discipline and the societies studied in that historical period. Personal archives are, thus, particularly rich documents for a focus on Africa in entangled and global history.

Keywords Libya · Ethnology · Biography · Education · Colonialism · Personal archives

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S. Bruzzi (✉)
University of Turin, Turin, Italy
e-mail: silvia.bruzzi@unito.it

Introduction

Among my most vivid memories of attending Irma Taddia's Modern African History course at Bologna University is her overwhelming enthusiasm for talking about African history, fieldwork research and the need for multiplying and diversifying historical sources. From among this multiplicity of sources to use for a social history of Africa, she has always had a particular interest in valorising not only collected documents, working papers and fieldnotes of scholars who worked in Africa (e.g. Chelati Dirar, Gori and Taddia, 1997; Taddia, 1997), but also their life trajectories, presented through biographic and autobiographic writings. To this end, she has exhorted her friends and colleagues to write on their own experiences and active involvement in African history, such as with the Russian ethnographer Maria Right (Taddia, 2008). Personal documents and archives of individual researchers have great potential both because the data collected can be used as primary historical sources, and because they tell us about the relationship between the researchers and their object of study. Besides, they are a unique resource to inquiry the roles, uses and relationships that researchers develop with their ordinary writings, throughout their life as researchers and not only during the development of a project or the writing of a research article (Lefebvre, 2015: 13).

In this chapter, I would contribute to this enterprise of valorisation of personal documents and archives of individual researchers who worked in Africa. For this, I will trace the life trajectory and work of Ester Panetta (1894–1983), one of the first Italian anthropologists to work and live in Africa in the first half of the twentieth century. The personal archives of the first generation of Italian anthropologists and orientalists have been the subject of a number of historical works, but those deal essentially with men. Within the two main branches of pioneering work in Italian anthropology, namely the philological-linguistic and the physical-medical-biological (Puccini, 1991: 7–9), women working in Africa are still underestimated, even if they were certainly present. Among them, we can mention Claudia Massari (1943), who, with the ethnologist Vinigi Lorenzo Grottanelli, co-authored the essay *I Baria, i Cunama e i Beni Amer*, a scientific work resulting from the Mission to Lake Tana. A pupil of Lidio Cipriani and a collaborator of Vinigi Lorenzo Grottanelli, she conducted research and teaching activities, mainly from a physical anthropology perspective, at the Institute of Anthropology of the Royal University of Florence, directed at the time by Prof. Giuseppe Genna (Massari, 1942, 1951, 1943). However, it is mainly within the philological and linguistic fields that we can find well-known female scholars, such as the orientalist and Arabist Laura Veccia Vaglieri (1893–1989), author of a grammar of the Arabic language still in use today, and Maria Nallino (1908–1974), daughter of the orientalist Carlo Alfonso Nallino (Baldinetti, 1995; Minganti, 1974; Zilio-Grandi, 2018).

The philological-linguistic approach also marked the work of Panetta, who worked as a teacher and lived, as a single and unmarried woman, in Libya, mostly in Benghazi, before returning to Italy during the Second World War. As a teacher and scholar of Libyan languages and cultures, she was one of the first Italian academics to be

recognised at both national and international levels in the 1930s as an Arabist. After World War II, she was recognised as an ethnologist in an almost exclusively male university world in which the ethno-anthropological discipline was becoming more professional and where studies in demology and folklore prevailed (Puccini, 1991, 1998). Her life trajectory allows me to trace a transnational history, from which emerges the intimate bond that was woven between the processes of nation and empire building across the Mediterranean.

By resorting to her personal archive, only recently deposited at Florence State Archives, I will retrace her life trajectory and her scientific production, thanks also to her personal papers and documents (including study certificates and administrative documents) produced on her return to Italy after she lost everything during the Second World War in Libya. I will use these documents to trace the biography not only of a scholar but also of a refugee of post-unification Italy, an orphan of the 1908 earthquake, and a veteran of Italian colonisation on the other side of the Mediterranean. After having retraced her migration route from Reggio Calabria to Rome, passing through Naples, Tripoli and Benghazi, I will focus on her activities of study, research and teaching Arabic, Libyan dialects and popular culture in Benghazi. Finally, I will suggest the potential and limitations of using her ethnographic studies and personal writings as a source for the social history of Northeast Africa.

Internal Migration, Displacement and Homing Processes Between Italy and Libya

From the Agrarian Crisis in the 1880s until the First World War, Italy experienced a massive exodus of its population that migrated abroad. Until the 1920s Italian emigration to the African colonies involved especially the population of southern Italy, which had been affected not only by an agricultural crisis but also by several natural disasters that culminated in the disastrous earthquake that in 1908 razed Reggio Calabria and Messina to the ground.

A catastrophe struck the life of Ester Panetta in 1894 when she was only a few months old: a serious earthquake devastated the region of Calabria. She had been born on the first of February of that year in Reggio Calabria, already orphaned by her father Giuseppe (1864–1894). Later, she also lost her mother, who died in the earthquake of 1908, when she and her sister Rosa were 14 and 15 years old, respectively. The estimated number of orphans of the devastating earthquake of 1908 was around 3,000. For their care, the National Work of Patronage for the Orphans of the Earthquake was established under the patronage of Queen Elena. Ecclesiastic institutions took care of “the earthquake refugees”. The guardian of Ester and her sister worked for their transfer to a college of Franciscan nuns in Rome, where the two sisters found a “home” and were able to continue their studies (Vacca, 1984: 248). This religious welfare institution became a substitute family for the two sisters. While her sister became a religious teacher and a nun in the Novitiate of Grottaferrata in 1915, Ester

chose a secular study path and took a university degree in Arabic and Islamic studies (1912–1917).¹

We do not know much about the reasons that led her to this choice, but it is plausible that she approached the study of Arabic through the networks of relationships of the Franciscan missionary nuns with whom she lived as a guest in Rome. In particular, she dedicated herself to the study of Arabic and Islamic studies and graduated with full marks in Colonial Culture in 1917 from the Royal Oriental Institute of Naples, directed at the time by Francesco Beguinot.² In the years 1916–1918, always at the same institute, she attended several advanced courses in Berber, literary Arabic, Egyptian and the Tripoli dialect.³ Giorgio Levi Della Vida (1886–1967) was a professor of Arabic at the time, but she was also a pupil of Francesco Beguinot (1879–1953), the first professor of Berber language in Italy.⁴

The question of teaching Arabic and the dialects of Arabic-speaking countries began to enter Italy's political agenda in those very years, responding to the strategic, military and administrative interests of colonial officers. They favoured, in principle, the employment of Italian personnel in translation and interpreting services, but given the shortage of Italian personnel qualified in this field, local personnel were largely used.⁵ At the end of the war, the Arabist Carlo Alfonso Nallino, author of, among other things, the reprinted edition of the *L'Arabo parlato in Egitto* in 1913, spoke out on the question of examinations for the teaching of Arabic in secondary schools, complaining that there was a lack of suitable institutes to prepare Italian teachers and translators of Arabic. This was a lack, which, as he pointed out in a letter to the Ministry of Education, had a negative impact on Italy's political and administrative action in Libya and the Middle East (Airò, 2013: 188–9).

¹ On Rosa Panetta, Florence State Archives, Florence (hereafter FSA), Fondo Ester Panetta (hereafter FEP), Testimonianze, Ester della Croce. See the “testimonies” collected with great care by Ester Panetta to request her sister beatification.

² FSA FEP, Carte e Documenti Personali (hereafter CDP), Diploma in Studi Coloniali.

³ FSA FEP, CDP, R. Istituto Universitario Orientale di Napoli, Naples 17 August 1942.

⁴ Francesco Beguinot, professor of Abyssinian history and Semitic languages at the University of Rome since 1910, was chosen in 1911, when he was still a young scholar, by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to participate as a linguist in the Italian Archaeological Mission in Cyrenaica and Tripolitania (1911–1913). The archaeological mission was fully in line with the colonial project and conceived of orientalist and linguists as privileged actors for the knowledge of the territory to be conquered. In these circumstances, in the months preceding the Italian occupation and the Italo-Turkish war, Francesco Beguinot conducted the first studies in Libya on the dialects, customs and Berber folk traditions of Tripolitania (Cresti 2015; Di Tolla 2015; Panetta 1953). Ester was one of the first students to take his Berber courses, which had become fundamental at the Royal Oriental Institute.

⁵ Corte di Appello per la Libia in Tripoli (1915), *Per l'inaugurazione dell'anno giudiziario 1915–16/Relazione statistica del capo del Pubblico Ministero avv. Antonio Marongiu*, Tipo-litografia del Governo, Tripoli.

After she graduated in Colonial Culture in 1917 with a thesis entitled "Primary Teaching of the Indigenous People of North Africa in Politics and Colonial Law"⁶ and having obtained a qualification to teach French, she moved to Libya in 1927, where she stayed until 1940. These were important years for the Fascist reform of the education system in Libya, and Ester Panetta was a valuable resource for the implementation of these reforms. She was certainly not a marginal agent but was a cultural and functional intermediary working for the colonial administration.⁷

In 1928, the first reform of the education system for "indigenous people" was approved, which defined a separation between Italians and Arabs in schools. Primary schools for Arab children and training schools for girls were thus established, while higher education for Africans was not established until 1935 (Di Pasquale, 2012: 8).

When Panetta moved to Libya, accompanied by an aunt from a village of the province of Reggio Calabria, she first lived in Tripoli for two years as a French language teacher, then moved to Benghazi, where she taught Arabic and Islamic institutions at the schools for the children of Italian settlers, in particular at the Regia Scuola Media G. Carducci.⁸ She was therefore part of the teaching staff of colonial schools that was afflicted by economic and contractual precariousness, usually made up of women from the lower and middle classes (Di Pasquale, 2013: 118–20; Di Pasquale, 2014). Mainly marginalised in their homeland, Italian women in Africa could take advantage of the opportunities arising from renewed geographical mobility to open up a new professional career. As in the case of most settlers, emigration to the other side of the Mediterranean responded, in fact, to the desire "for a social promotion difficult to obtain in the motherland" (Labanca, 2001: 24). While the teaching staff in Libya was made up mainly of women, there were rare cases where, as in her case, they had language training in Arabic and colonial studies. But it was even more exceptional for an Italian woman to have access to a position as a colonial official. As a teacher in the 1930s, Panetta made a career in the administrative apparatus until, after the Second World War, she was an official with research assignments at the Ministry of Italian Africa. Other teachers, such as Luigi Cerbella, Fulvio Contini and Carlo Petrocchi, were, at the same time, an integral part of the administrative elite of the colony, but they still represented a minority (Di Pasquale, 2013: 121).

In 1929, Panetta won the public exam organised by the Ministry of the Colonies for the chair of Arabic Language and Islamic Culture in Libya's secondary schools and moved to Benghazi. These were the last years of the atrocious war of the "reconquest of Cyrenaica" (1922–1932). Her teaching activities at the R. Liceo Scientifico and the R. Istituto Tecnico of Benghazi were accompanied by a passionate dedication to study and research. Published in 1943, *L'Arabo parlato a Bengasi* [Arabic spoken

⁶ Her diploma thesis, together with her other publications, was submitted by her to the Italian Africa School Office for recruitment in 1929 and was lost when her house was burnt down in Benghazi. FSA FEP, CDP, Relazione sulle pubblicazioni, p. 10.

⁷ On the historiographical debate concerning the role of colonial officials and intermediaries, see the conference "Officials and Intermediaries in the Service of Colonial Government" (2011: Pavia, Italy) and the subsequent publication by Dore et al. (2013).

⁸ FSA FEP, CDP, Indennizzo di guerra.

in Bengasi] (Panetta, 1943b) is an example of how research and teaching combined and fed into her work. A product of the colonial experience, this publication was an important contribution to the many manuals and grammars for learning Arabic that were published in the years after 1911, under the auspices of political authorities such as the Minister of Education Luigi Credaro, who was a great supporter of the study and teaching of Arabic (Airò, 2013: 184–5). Whereas mostly non-professionals had published these Arabic grammars and manuals, Panetta's text was instead recognised for its professionalism, as she used a glottological method that, as Beguinot himself recognised, contained “acute and brilliant observations” (Chiauzzi, 1977: 298). In the first volume, there were stories and texts that the author had collected from the daily use of the language spoken in Benghazi, and at the bottom of the pages were analytical notes that referenced the customs and beliefs of other countries.

The grammar was inspired by these texts and had a “practical character”. As the author suggested, it was born later “in the school and for the school”.⁹ In addition to the grammar of the Benghazi dialect, Panetta also wrote one for literary Arabic, which was both the product of and the support for her teaching of the Arabic language in Libya; it was born from the active interaction with her students, who, with “their doubts, their difficulties, their objections, had been the inspirers, or rather the collaborators”.¹⁰ The grammar was accompanied by an appendix that was the result of the exchange of ideas with the students on the differences and similarities between the written and spoken languages and with references to Arabic spoken in Benghazi. Her Benghazi grammar was published a few years later than that of Antonio Cesaro (1939), *L'Arabo parlato a Tripoli*. These two manuals responded to the need, already raised by Nallino (1913), to promote the study and teaching of Arabic. They were indeed “functional to the management and control of the territory” and represented “an effective instrument for the diffusion of ideology and colonial discourse” aimed at the civilising mission of Italy on the fourth shore (Airò, 2013: 191–2).

In the 1930s, Italian educational policy in Libya, as in the Horn of Africa, was marked by the promotion of the Arabic language in the colonial territories. Thus, in addition to teaching Arabic in the middle schools of Benghazi, Panetta was called by the Ministry of the Colonies to be part of the commission for the teaching examinations of Libyan primary school teachers. This was a particularly delicate task that, in Tripoli, was not entrusted to any of the three Arabic teachers living in Libya; it was given to Professor Levi Della Vida, who was called for this task from Rome. For Benghazi, the mandate was instead entrusted to Panetta, although, as she herself remembered, “the task was even more difficult” because it could not succeed, and indeed was not appreciated “by the Arab gentlemen to be examined by a woman”.¹¹ On the other hand, despite the “Arabic policy” wanted by Italo Balbo in the 1930s—and in particular, despite the activities to promote the Arabic language in colonial schools—only a minority of the Libyan population attended Italian schools. There was a certain cultural resistance in this sense, given that Muslim students preferred

⁹ FSA FEP, CDP, Relazione sulle pubblicazioni, pp. ix–x.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*.

¹¹ FSA FEP, CDP, Carriera Didattica.

to attend Koranic schools, where the level of Arabic language teaching was certainly higher (Di Pasquale, 2012: 14). The teaching of Arabic was instead functional to the control of the territory by the colonial administration and military officials. Also in this context, Panetta's linguistic and cultural knowledge was put at the service of Italy when she worked for the Armed Forces Command as a teacher and lecturer of Arabic language and Islamic culture for Italian officers in Libya.

Her role as a colonial official was finally reconfirmed as part of the evacuation of 13,000 Libyan children when the war broke out. The decision to transfer the Libyan children to Italy was made by Governor Balbo, who had requested that Italian children living in Libyan territory be transferred to Italy when the Second World War broke out in North Africa. Only two weeks after Mussolini approved the resolution of their transfer in May 1940, 13,000 children left for Italy (Moretti, 2015: 140). The same ships that had brought the soldiers to Libya in the war territory of North Africa left from the ports of Benghazi, Tripoli and Derna with thousands of Libyan children on board (*ibidem*: 139).

As Moretti noted, the relative historiographical silence on the story of the Libyan children's transfer, as well as the scarce reworking in the public debate of the memory "on Italian emigration to the fourth shore and on the African sickness of the former settlers and the institutions they represent" would seem to be linked "to the need to remove from the collective imagination a part of our past in which it was the Italian government and a part of the population that wanted to emigrate to North Africa and not vice versa" (*ibidem*: 147).

In this regard, in her claim for war compensation—submitted on her return to Italy—Panetta recalls the service she performed in the schools of Benghazi as a teacher of Arabic and Islamic institutions:

In June 1940 I was "commanded" by the Fascio in Bengasi to accompany in Italy, together with two colleagues and some teachers, about 3,500 children of Italian Libya. I was supposed to return to the Headquarters in September 1940, for the school year 1940–41, but further events did not allow me to do so and I was hired by the Studies Office of the same Ministry of the A.I.¹²

During the second British invasion (December 1941–January 1942), Panetta lost all her possessions left in Libya, not only her rich library with rare works but also her own publications. Following her requests to the assistance office of the Italian Ministry of Africa, in 1949 she was finally recognised as a "refugee of Italian Africa".¹³

¹² FSA FEP, CDP, Domanda di Indennizzo di guerra.

¹³ FSA FEP, CDP, Recognition of the qualification of "refugee of Italian Africa", 1–4 February 1949.

Ethnography, Folklore and Intimacy in the Writings of Ester Panetta

Books, teaching and research were perhaps her “true home” and affect. In the early 1950s, after her return to Italy, she taught Arabic and Arabic dialects at the Faculty of Letters and Philosophy of the University of Rome.¹⁴ As a lecturer in Arabic and Arabic dialects and in ethnology from 1961 to 1965, Panetta taught Religion and Indigenous Institutions in Africa at the Oriental University Institute of Naples, as well as “Arabic dialects” at the University of Rome.¹⁵

During the years spent in Libya, the philological study of the Arabic language was enriched by Panetta’s interest in the dialects, history, literature and popular traditions of the city of Benghazi. Her research was deeply marked by the studies on folklore and demology developed in Italy by Raffaele Corso, Giuseppe Cocchiara and Giuseppe Vidossi (Cirese, 1956; Dore, 1980; Saunders, 1984). The author’s research perspective thus became part of the studies of folklore and the nascent ethnology that were carried out in Italy under the impulse of well-known folklorists, from the Sicilian Giuseppe Pitrè to the Calabrian Raffaele Corso. Panetta was also a contemporary of Carmelina Naselli, the first professor in Italy of the History of Folk Traditions, who founded and organised an Institute of the History of Folk Traditions in Catania from 1949 to 1950. Naselli’s research interests concerned the literature of popular traditions, a subject established only in 1942 (Branciforte, 2001: 58). Both Panetta and Naselli had moved from their training in literary and philological studies to the study of popular customs and traditions, religious life, city and cultural traditions, religious rites and folklore. Naselli was particularly interested in Sicily and Catania, and Panetta focused on Libya, especially Benghazi.

Panetta’s work is closely linked to the Orientalist school, such as that of her contemporaries whose academic paths crossed at the Oriental Institute of Naples, including Ignazio Guidi, Martino Mario Moreno and Enrico Cerulli. Their work was marked by a “positivistic” approach to historical-literary analysis, which was attentive “to the relationship between versions and variants, in order to identify and reconstruct the historical transformations of texts, written or oral as they may be” (Lusini, 2017: 166). As was the case not only for these scholars but also for Panetta, a “punctual and rigorous attention to linguistic and philological data was the essential starting point of any research” (*ibidem*).

Panetta’s work was particularly appreciated in the Italian academy, but it was also valued abroad, both for the finesse of her glottological and linguistic analysis—which put her on par with other Italian male Orientalists—and for her ability to access the Muslim female world, “so inaccessible to people of the opposite sex” (Beguinot, 1947: 119). According to Francesco Beguinot, in *Cirenaica Sconosciuta* (Panetta, 1951), a work that was, in the author’s own words, “the fruit of 13 years lived

¹⁴ FSA FEP, CDP, Ministero della Pubblica Istruzione, Rome, 4 March 1949.

¹⁵ FSA FEP, CDP, Ministero della Pubblica Istruzione, Naples, 7 April 1971.

in contact with local women”,¹⁶ Panetta filled a gap in the ethnographic and linguistic knowledge of Cyrenaica, which, compared to the French studies on Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco, had been little studied, given the brevity of the Italian occupation (*ibidem*). Her work stems from her experience in the field and collection of ethnographic material and oral literature, which she then reworked and only afterwards analysed and compared to the ethnographic and linguistic literature available at the time on North Africa. As was the case with the first French women ethnologists to approach the profession in the 1920s (Lemaire, 2011), Panetta's work was also well received and encouraged by the male academic world, especially for its contribution to the knowledge of the female world and to the intimacy of the indigenous people. In her first monograph published in 1940, *Popular Libyan Practices and Beliefs*, the author claimed to have applied the method of participant observation to collect information:

Almost by surprise, living in their environment, attending their speeches, taking part in their practices, there, confused with each other. For several years I spent whole hours every day, long winter evenings in their mostly filthy, sultry, cramped houses, snuggled on a mat, like one of them, managing to make them forget the diversity of my origin and religion. Common life [...] waiting for the moment in which to catch that news, to witness that practice.¹⁷

Enrico Cerulli, Sabatino Moscati and Francesco Gabrieli acknowledged that she had developed the research methods of the French ethnographic and Islamic school (Edmond Doutté and René Basset) and the linguistic research of Berber and Maghreb Arabic dialectology by Hans Stumme and Francesco Beguinot in an original way.¹⁸ However, while the observations of Edmond Doutté—who was the first to apply the theories of the English anthropological school (James Frazer, Edward Tylor) and the French sociological school (Marcel Mauss, Emile Durkheim) to the Maghreb countries—was often characterised by a dislike of the populations studied (Rachik, 2016), Panetta conducted participatory observation, expressing her empathy and gratitude for her informers (Panetta, 1940: 6). It is this empathy that led her to dig into the intimacy of Libyan oral literature. On the subject of *Forme e soggetti della letteratura popolare libica* (Panetta, 1943a), Paolo Toschi, a folklorist, philologist and scholar of popular traditions, noted that in the section she had dedicated to “traditional folk songs”, the author had collected some “bright songs of love”:

Pretty lullabies in which the poor Arab mother, similar in this respect to the mothers of our countries [...] and of the whole world, wishes her creature and already sees for her, with the eyes of desire, the greatest fortunes in life! And the style is rich in metaphors, elisions, agile passages, naive and original images, expressed with a language to which an ever-living imagination gives the dominant tone!¹⁹

¹⁶ FSA FEP, Letter by Ester Panetta to Mons. Milan, Roma 28 June 1981.

¹⁷ FSA FEP, CDP, Relazione sulle pubblicazioni, p. XI.

¹⁸ FSA FEP, CDP, Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, Estratto dai Rendiconti delle Adunanze solenni (Seduta del 20 giugno 1973), Volume VII—Fascicolo 9. Her merits in ethnographic research on the customs and folklore of Muslim North Africa, especially Libya, were recognised in 1973 with the prize for the History and Ethnology of Africa of the “Giorgio Maria Sangiorgi” Foundation, established at the Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei.

¹⁹ FSA FEP, CDP, Recensioni.

Panetta's interest in Libyan intimacy, the world of the invisible, wonderful stories (as can be seen from the texts she has collected on *jinn*) and spirituality, "traditions", "superstitions", popular medicine, rituals relating to life cycles, and also her attentive look at everyday life at home, and the themes of childhood and maternity, as they were told in the oral literature transmitted by her female informers, shows us how her work was moved by a strong bond and affect for a land, the Libyan land, which she said had literally welcomed her within their home and family walls. This interest is also the expression of a familiarity that the author weaved in Libya, in a dialectical relationship with her *Heimat*, Calabria.

Serving as an activist in the women's section of Catholic Action after the Second World War, Panetta was marked by her life experiences, as an orphan and a single woman, by a deep religious devotion, transmitted through her family history (as a guest in the boarding school of the Franciscan nuns and as the sister of a missionary) and by the ties she continued to maintain through intense correspondence, with her relatives who remained in Calabria. It was a religious feeling that had been strengthened in her experience as a refugee, first as an orphan of the 1908 earthquake, then also as a "veteran" of Italian Libya. The ecclesiastical institutions, especially the strong affective and family ties with the Franciscan missionaries and the Christian nuns—as can be seen, among other things, from the networks of close relations along the spiritual path of her sister Rosa—were perhaps the only real resource during her life—along with her studies and books—for facing disasters.

If the migratory experience, the activities of studying and teaching in Libya, allowed her to "emancipate herself" from a condition of social and economic vulnerability that had afflicted her and to project herself from the "traditional" life of her native country into "colonial modernity", she also saw the colonial situation as an opportunity for the birth of a "modern Libyan woman".²⁰

In the 1930s, as part of the so-called Arab Policy promoted by Governor Italo Balbo, a series of reforms aimed at Arab and Muslim women were initiated. They prohibited marriage before the bride turned 15 years of age and established a school for Arab nurses to help combat infant mortality. The latter measure echoed similar initiatives promoted in the 1930s by colonial authorities in other regions of Africa, made to control the most intimate aspects of subjects, such as birth, motherhood and reproduction (Hugon, 2005). In line with a policy that was widespread at the time in European colonial discourse, the Princess Maria Pia boarding school for Muslim nurses was founded by the Italian government in 1935, with the aim of combating the high infant mortality in the colony and "penetrating Libyan families more effectively" (Di Pasquale, 2003: 186).

Deeply marked by the rhetoric of colonial propaganda, on the one hand, Panetta justified her role as a colonial officer in Libya. On the other hand, she herself, who had been an orphan and a refugee and who had invoked the "providence" of state assistance and ecclesiastical institutions, saw in Italy's mission on the other side of the Mediterranean a work of "moral regeneration" for the Libyan populations that could be carried out by working in the intimacy of Muslim societies, and in particular in

²⁰ FSA FEP, Pubblicazioni n. 6, Panetta (1949), "Donne... solo donne", *Continenti*, IV, n. 5/6.

women's spaces. The humanitarian rhetoric that imposed itself among the European powers after the Second World War was articulated in Panetta's political position, particularly when she assumed the role of Head of Service at the Study Office of the former Italian Ministry of Africa. She then took part in the study and publication of over 20 volumes of the Committee for the Documentation of Italian Activities in Africa, established by the decree of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in January 1952 (Dore, 1980: 130). The activity of the Study Office of the former Italian Ministry of Africa was aimed at enhancing Italy's work in Africa during the years when the UN was deciding the future of Italian colonies after World War II. With this new assignment as a ministerial official, the scholar was able to access the archives of the former Italian Ministry of Africa and publish bibliographies in two volumes: *Italian Studies of Ethnography and Folklore of Libya*, 1963 and *Italian Studies of Ethnology and Folklore of East Africa: Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somalia, 1973–1974*. If, on the one hand, her bibliography was of service to the committee, enhancing with ideological rhetoric the work of Italy in its colonial possessions, on the other hand, it is still a very important reference, in my opinion, especially for the great attention paid by the author to the synthesis of studies, often marginal and little known, on colonial societies.

Conclusion: Styles, Ethnographic Writings and Intersubjectivity

Private archives of Italian women who lived in overseas colonies, their "little stories" so marginalised by historiography, have been sometimes rehabilitated, thanks to the documents preserved in the National Diary Archive of Pieve Santo Stefano. Here, the prevailing stylistic note is that of nostalgia and emotion (Ghezzi, 2005: 368; Labanca, 2001). In Panetta's personal archive, on the other hand, the dimension of subjectivity and emotion that emerges in her personal correspondence, marked, among other things, by a language imbued with references to Catholic values and morality, gives way in her essays to scientific writing that imposes itself with a detached, positivist and objectivist style. As she stressed, her work was a meticulous collection of "texts" of Libyan popular literature with the intention of "registering" and "fixing" the word of the "natives". "The texts collected from the native speakers," she wrote in the introduction to one of her essays, "have been collected faithfully to the source, my pen presented itself as a record that receives and fixes" (Panetta, 1943a: 9). During that period in Libya, she said that she spent her evenings as a guest of Muslim families, "accepted as one of them, without ever showing any wonder and without asking any questions, observing and remembering" (Vacca, 1984: 247).

The Italian ethnologist Luigi Vanicelli observed how the scholar had managed to penetrate the intimacy of everyday life, especially of the female world, revealing the

“indigenous spiritual life” with a “faithful and precise” analysis, “a sure foundation for wide-ranging ethnological studies”.²¹

The ethnographic method then prevailing was marked by a strong positivism, attentive to the rigour of linguistic and literary translation, from which emerges an anxiety for wanting to “record” and “translate” “living texts”, transcribing orality into written literature, objectifying the information taken from one’s informers and leaving aside an issue that would become fundamental in contemporary ethnography, namely the relationship between the researcher and his/her informers, the dimension of intersubjectivity (Passerini, 2003) that is here rather silenced. Ethnographic writing appears very different from memorial writing, even if it is also drawn from memory. In Panetta’s writing, in fact, one notices a tension in trying to objectify and fix the *otherness* of the Libyan popular and feminine world. However, the analysis of her life trajectory highlights that while investigating Libyan popular cultures and intimacy, the author was participating in the definition of her own subjectivity, which, by extension, ended up proposing a certain model of Italian-ness. This experience of female mobility between Italy and Libya could also be considered a diasporic intimate experience that was traced through a turbulent process of reconstructing her “home”, from Reggio Calabria to Rome, passing through Naples, Tripoli and Benghazi. Marginal subjects in historiography, “single” women like Panetta, are also examples of “nomadic subjects” (Braidotti, 1995) who, through complex dynamics of geographical and social mobility, experienced a tumultuous process of reconstruction of “their own home”, namely a space that is at the same time intimate and familiar—real or desired—between Italy and Libya.

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²¹ FSA FEP, Recensioni, p. 30.

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Visualizing Africa's Past

Symbolism, Self-representation and Adaptation: Coins as a Source for African History



Karin Pallaver

Abstract This chapter focuses on coins as a source for studying African history. It adopts a long-term perspective to investigate how African political institutions and European colonial states have used specific images on coins to represent themselves. At the same time, it looks at how African currency users have engaged with these images and how such engagement has sometimes led to changes in currency design. The first section of the chapter analyses precolonial coins and their relevance for the study of African history. The second section provides examples of the coins issued during the colonial period and the images used by the colonial states to represent themselves. This section adopts a comparative perspective to highlight how colonial symbols on coins changed over time and what this can tell us, more broadly, about changing conditions in the colonies. The third section is devoted to the Italian colonies in East Africa, an area that has received little attention from the perspective of its monetary history yet is representative of the many failures of European colonial monetary policies. The last section examines the post-independence period and the symbols and names that African leaders chose to transform colonial money into *African* money.

Keywords Coins · Colonialism · Banknotes · Maria Theresa thaler · Independence

Introduction

African forms of money have been an object of investigation by historians and anthropologists interested in understanding African institutions and economies. In the 1960s, the history of money in Africa received particular attention from economic historians focused especially on studying precolonial African monetary systems. It was in this period that African history developed as a scientific field with the aim of demonstrating that Africans had a history independent from Europeans and thus from

K. Pallaver (✉)
University of Bologna, Bologna, Italy
e-mail: karin.pallaver@unibo.it

colonialism, and studying precolonial African currencies contributed to this aim. Research in this vein rejected the definition of precolonial commodity currencies as “primitive” money, as they had been deemed by early ethnographers (Einzig, 1949; Quiggin, 1949), and instead showed them to be more “modern” and sophisticated than those later introduced by Europeans (Curtin, 1975; Johnson, 1970; Lovejoy, 1974). The introduction of colonial currencies had been defined by colonial ethnographers as a “revolution” (Bohannon, 1959) and yet, as more recent works have suggested, African systems of exchange continued to employ commodity currencies despite the introduction of colonial coins and banknotes and often in combination with colonial money (Guyer, 1995; Pallaver, 2022; Swanepoel, 2015). With regard to the post-independence period, scholars have focused on the symbolism associated with the money of newly independent states (Eagleton, 2016; Marten & Kula, 2008).

Besides its economic role, money undoubtedly also has symbolic qualities, being a means to convey official discourses and representations of imperial as well as post-independence identities. These identities are expressed through the images and texts on coins and banknotes whose aim is to express specific self-representations of the state as well as convey particular messages to the people using them (Eagleton, 2016; Marten & Kula, 2008: 183). The study of the symbolism of money in the African context provides important insights into the ways in which the institutions issuing it sought to represent themselves. At the same time, changes in the design of currency were not only the result of political transitions—such as from colonies to independent states—but also responses to the ways in which people using money perceived the state and its currency. Therefore, looking at how coins and banknotes are designed and how this design changes over time provides important insights into changing social and political realities as well as the relationship between the institutions issuing currency and the people using it on the ground.

Banknotes are an important tool for issuing institutions to convey a specific image of themselves. For example, the bridges on the back of the euro banknotes symbolize communication between the people of European countries and thus convey an image of the European Union as a bridge between different populations. Scholars have produced fascinating works on banknotes and their symbolism. Mwangi (2001), for example, has shown that during the Mau Mau revolt in Kenya, the British changed the design of banknotes to provide a different image of the state in a time of crisis. Coins are generally less telling than banknotes. As Eagleton (2016: 223) points out, the imagery of coins tends to be simpler, as it uses a more distilled visual language than the more complex images characterizing banknotes. Nevertheless, the study of banknotes in Africa is less relevant than that of coins as paper money was not in use in the precolonial period and never became popular in the colonial period. As Jean and Comaroff (2005) have shown, African societies were particularly distrustful of paper money because it was not durable and could easily be destroyed. This preference remained at the time of independence, as well, when new national currencies were introduced. Coins were preferred by African currency users and thus, much more so than banknotes, represent an important tool for investigating processes of historical change in Africa. At the same time, coins are particularly significant for tracing a long-term history of money symbolism in Africa as they were issued in some parts of

the continent even in the precolonial period. The idea that studying coin symbolism is the exclusive domain of numismatics experts or coin collectors obscures the relevance of these symbols for understanding broader historical processes.

This chapter adopts a long-term perspective to investigate how African political institutions and European colonial states have used specific images on coins to represent themselves. At the same time, it also looks at the ways African currency users have engaged with these images and how changes to currency design have sometimes been the result of such engagement or stemmed from the need to adapt to pre-existing monetary practices. The first section of the chapter analyses two examples of precolonial coins and their relevance for the study of African history. The second section provides examples of the coins issued during the colonial period and the images colonial states used to represent themselves. This section adopts a comparative perspective to highlight how colonial symbols on coins changed over time and what this can tell us, more broadly, about changing conditions in the colonies. The third section is devoted to the Italian colonies in East Africa. Although this geographical area has received little attention in terms of its monetary history, it offers a significant example of the many failures of European colonial monetary policies. The last section examines the post-independence period and the symbols and names chosen by African leaders to transform colonial money into *African* money.

Coins as Symbols of Power and Trade Before Colonial Rule

In the precolonial period, the use of commodity currencies—such as shells, beads, metals and cloth—was the rule across the African continent. These objects were circulated either by traders or by African polities that made their use obligatory by establishing them as the means for paying taxes. In some cases, African political authorities or traders transformed these commodities into units of currency. For example, traders strung specific numbers of cowrie shells or glass beads on cords as a way to create standardized currency units and facilitate their transport as well as commercial negotiations. Commodities were also transformed by African polities. For example, in the kingdom of Buganda, craftsmen working for the *kabaka* (king) manufactured small ivory discs—known as *obusanga*—with holes drilled in them that were put on strings. The *kabaka* had a monopoly on the manufacturing of *obusanga* and controlled their circulation (Pallaver, 2015: 476). By virtue of being issued and controlled by the king, *obusanga* became a symbol of wealth and power. Another significant example is that of copper crosses used in the Katanga region of the present-day Democratic Republic of the Congo: in the nineteenth century, these crosses became important symbols of wealth and power and were instrumental in the creation of political networks (Gordon, 2021).

In contrast, it was rare for coins to be issued in precolonial sub-Saharan Africa. The earliest example of coins being minted in Africa can be seen in the kingdom of Axum (present-day Ethiopia) where money was struck from the 3rd until the 8th century CE (Pankhurst, 1961). These coins constitute important sources for the history of Aksum

and its rulers. Given that they bore the name of the ruler and a portrait of the King, they are important chronological markers. Initially, the symbols on the coins were the crescent and disc, symbols of the South Arabian cults to which Aksum adhered. Later, with the empire's conversion to Christianity in the 4th century, these symbols were replaced with a cross to show the political centrality of the new religion. Gold coins were generally inscribed with Greek writing since, having a greater value than silver and copper coins, they were employed in international trade. Silver and copper coins of smaller value were utilized largely within the empire and their inscriptions were thus in Ge'ez (Phillipson, 2006). After the conversion to Christianity, inscriptions made clear reference to the new religion with phrases such as "Joy and Peace to the people" and "He conquers through God". The symbolism of these coins had important political implications as it represented a way to link Aksum to its main commercial partners, Rome and Byzantium, on the basis of a common Christian identity.¹

The Swahili sultanates of the East African coast also minted their own coins. Similarly to Axum, gold, silver and copper coins were minted in these areas for international trade or local use.² Coins from the eastern African coast show significant differences as compared to other coins minted in the framework of the Islamic coining tradition: they bear no mint name, date, or denomination, and no acknowledgement of the Caliph (Walker, 1936). However, they also share some similarities, such as the meaning of the words making up the legend that runs continuously from one side to the other and the name of the ruler (Brown, 1993). Most of the coins found in excavations along the coast are copper coins produced in Kilwa Kisiwani (Freeman-Grenville, 1959: 255; Perkins et al., 2014). Kilwa-type coins were of a relatively regular size and weight and were characterized by a rhyme established between the two sides: the obverse affirms the ruler's faith in Allah, while the reverse bears an epithet of Allah chosen to rhyme with the ruler's name. The circulation of Kilwa copper coins was limited, and they seem to not have filtered into Indian Ocean markets in significant quantities (Perkins et al., 2014; Wynne-Jones & Fleisher, 2012). This suggests local use and is a clear indication of the connection between these coins and the authority of specific rulers, rather than a universal standard of value (Wynne-Jones & Fleisher, 2016). The sultans of Kilwa were able to control the knowledge needed to mint the coins and had the authority to circulate them for commercial purposes (Wynne-Jones & Fleisher, 2012: 30). At the same time, these coins also acquired ritual and symbolic functions. Kilwa-type copper coins were recently excavated in proximity to a 15th-century tomb at Songo Mnara, for example, testifying to their symbolic and commemorative purposes (Perkins et al., 2014).

Gold coins were also issued by the Kilwa mint in the 14th century. These are the only coins bearing the name "Kilwa" on them (Brown, 1991, 1993), and only three examples of such coins have been found to date. Although there is no clear evidence as to how they were used, it might be supposed that they were employed in

¹ The British Museum, "Aksumite Coins," in *Smarthistory*, 23 September 2016, <https://smarthistory.org/aksumite-coins/> (last accessed 20 October 2023).

² This section is based in part on Pallaver (2018a: 448–50).

international trade given that their weight is similar to that of the dinar, the standard currency of the Indian Ocean (Horton & Middleton, 2000: 93). The inscription on the reverse of the gold coins excavated at Kilwa reads:

May Allah prolong his kingdom
 The Sultan al-Malik al-Mansur
 Strongest in the Faith, Father of Gifts,
 al-Hasan ibn Sulaiman, Helper
 of the Religion, al-Mahdali

and on the obverse:

Struck in Kilwa
 There is no God but Allah
 Muhammad is the Apostle of Allah
 He sent him with Guidance
 and the Religion of Truth (Brown, 1991: 2–3).

Similarly to Axumite coins, the Swahili coins bore religious symbols and inscriptions that were meant to create a strong connection between the sultanates ruling along the East African coast and Muslim traders and polities situated in other parts of the Indian Ocean world.

The historical and archaeological importance of precolonial Swahili coins lies largely in the fact that they provide some of the only textual evidence available for dating and naming kings and their dynasties along the Swahili coast (Chittick, 1965, 1973; Freeman-Grenville, 1971; Middleton, 2003). The first studies on these coins were therefore limited to numismatics analysis, with historians and archaeologists using the coins as chronological markers.³ Recent studies have instead shifted attention to the different ways these coins were used and the symbolism connected to them, also in relation to non-metallic currencies such as beads (Perkins, 2013; Wynne-Jones & Fleisher, 2012, 2016).

As sources for studying African history, precolonial African coins are thus important as chronological markers. They are significant in that they illustrate the centrality of religion not only for the authorities who issued them, but also for creating connections with international trading partners through a common identity based on Christian or Muslim belonging. Archaeological findings involving these coins can be also considered markers of these trading connections. For example, the majority of Axum gold coins have been excavated in India, Arabia, and other sites outside of Ethiopia (Phillipson, 2006: 33).

³ For a discussion of the connection between the Swahili coins and early Swahili documents such as the Kilwa Chronicles, and the related debate between Freeman-Grenville and Chittick, see Perkins (2013: 43–9).

Animals, Kings and Holes: Symbols and Self-representations on Colonial Coins

The issue of coins was one of Europeans' first concerns after establishing their colonial occupation. Colonial currencies were needed to reduce transaction costs between the metropole and the colonies and to facilitate administration, especially tax collection. They were perceived as a tool for forging a homogenous colonial space and enforcing local recognition of the authority of the new colonial government. For this reason, the symbols that colonial states put on their coins prove particularly relevant for understanding how the state sought to represent itself and how this self-representation changed over time.⁴

For colonial states that were also monarchies, colonial coins always featured portraits of metropolitan rulers along with royal symbols. In the case of republican states, national symbols were generally engraved on the coins minted for the colonies. National symbols were commonly mixed with natural elements from Africa, such as animals and plants. In their colonies in West and Equatorial Africa, for example, the French introduced the *franc* and *centimes*. The obverse of these coins showcased a laureate or winged head and the inscription "Republique Française" and the reverse bore a gazelle and the inscription "Afrique Occidentale Française" or "Afrique Equatoriale Française". African symbols used on coins were adapted from the fauna and flora of the different colonies. In French Somaliland, for example, the gazelle was replaced by an antelope, whereas in Madagascar it was substituted with the head of an ox.

A common characteristic of colonial coins was that small denomination coins were drilled. The reason for this practice is that, in many parts of the continent, commodity currencies—such as cowrie shells or glass beads—were put on strings. The colonial understanding was that, to promote the use of colonial money, coins needed to be minted with a hole so that people could string them together and carry them around the same way they did with beads and shells. Making a hole in the coins clearly represented a problem in terms of the symbolism of colonial money, as it was impossible to retain a portrait of rulers on coins with a hole in the middle. British East Africa was the first part of the British Empire in Africa in which this innovation was introduced. There was a heated discussion within the Colonial Office about introducing this currency change. As discussed above, engraving colonial coins with symbols of the new rulers was a means to create, and later reinforce, the entirely new identity promoted by imperial ideologies (Helleiner, 2002: 183). Nonetheless, the decision was made to replace the king's head with a hole surrounded by four elephant tusks, as ivory was one of the most important commodities exported from East Africa. In this case, the British were willing to remove the monarch's portrait from the coins because they believed it was the only way to oust cowrie shells from circulation in Uganda. The colonial coins introduced by the British could not compete with the ubiquitous cowrie shell, which was more suitable for local economic and

⁴ This section is based largely on an observation of pictures of colonial coins from George S. Cuhaj (2012).

social transactions. This decision is revealing in terms of demonstrating that colonial authorities prioritized local ways of handling money, at least in the first decades of colonial rule (Pallaver, 2015: 495–6).

The same innovation was introduced in Nigeria in 1907. After the demonetization of cowrie shells, a drilled tenth-penny coin was introduced. The hole was surrounded by a hexagram or six-pointed star—called Solomon’s Seal in the Muslim world—and an inscription in Arabic on the reverse.⁵ On the obverse was the name of the British ruler and the image of a crown. After the establishment of the West African Currency Board in 1912, penny coins of different denominations with the same design were issued for the other British West African colonies as well (Fuller, 2009: 56). The design remained unchanged for the entire colonial period. It is possible to infer that, by using both the crown and the hexagon as symbols on the coins as well as combining British and Arabic inscriptions, the British wanted to represent themselves as willing to collaborate with all components of colonial society—especially Muslim traders and religious authorities—while at the same time promoting the use of colonial coins among these populations.

The Germans in German East Africa also drew inspiration from the British and minted their small denomination coins—called *hellers*—with a hole (Pallaver, 2023). From 1906 to the 1920s, small denomination coins with a hole were also minted in the Congo Free State under Leopold II and later under Belgian rule. It is worth noting that, for European states such as Portugal that considered African colonies to be little more than an extension of the metropole, African symbols do not appear on their coins. For example, on the *centavos* and *escudo* coins (1 *escudo* was worth 100 *centavos*) minted for Mozambique, the Portuguese put the value and the inscription “República Portuguesa” on the reverse, whereas the obverse bore the Portuguese East Africa coat of arms and the inscription “Colônia de Moçambique”. In Angola, the coins were similarly engraved with the Portuguese Angola coat of arms. In 1935, the Portuguese colonies were assigned new coats of arms that were later represented on coins. These included African natural elements, i.e. a golden elephant and golden zebra for Angola, positioned side by side with Portuguese national symbols.

There is no doubt that the Italians in the Horn of Africa were the colonizer state that encountered more problems in convincing African currency users to accept their coins. As the following section will discuss, this was due to the fact that the region already had a coin which had enjoyed wide circulation well before the establishment of colonial rule: the Maria Theresa thaler, a silver coin issued by the Vienna mint that had gained popularity in international trade circuits, especially in the Red Sea and Western Indian Ocean.

⁵ The origin of the symbol is unclear, as is its meaning. According to Žigulski (1992: 43), “Sometimes the sign implied a cosmological interpretation concerning the structure of the world. The hexagram represented the days of the week, its counterparts being the six visible planets, and it thus indicated the central position of the sabbath. The rays of the star triangles represented the two worlds, the upper and the lower, visible and invisible, and at the same time the two aspects of God, visible and hidden. They also expressed the birth of the microcosmos (man) from the macrocosmos (the world)”. I wish to thank Mattia Guidetti for his help and useful bibliographic suggestions.

Moustache and Diadems: Coins for the Italian Colonies

The Maria Theresa thaler (MTT) was a coin minted by the Vienna Mint starting from 1751. It bore the image of Empress Maria Theresa and the coat of arms of the Habsburg Empire, the two-headed eagle. The demand for thalers in international markets remained high after the death of the Empress in 1780, which is why, through an international agreement, the Vienna Mint was granted the right to continue minting the coins with the date “1780”, the year of the Empress’ death. The MTT was the most commonly used coin in the Horn of Africa at the time of colonial occupation, being the currency employed in both interregional and international trade. Locally, other currencies were also used and combined with the MTT, especially salt bars (called *amole*), glass beads, and Grass rifle cartridges (Pankhurst, 1962).

After the establishment of the Eritrea colony in 1890, the Italian state attempted to replace the Maria Theresa thaler with a new coin, the Eritrean thaler. The coin bore the portrait of King Umberto I and the Savoia (the ruling royal house at the time) coat of arms (Mauri, 2003). This coin was unable to compete with the well-established MTT, however, and not only—as some argued—because the king’s moustache could not hope to replace the elegant bust of Empress Maria Theresa with her diadem, but also because the colonial government made a number of errors, the most important one being that Eritrean thalers had a lower silver content than Maria Theresa ones (Pallaver, 2018b).

The use of the MTT was so well established that the Ethiopian emperor was likewise unable to replace it in his empire. Emperor Menelik issued his own thaler—the “Menelik thaler”—in 1893, probably as a response to the introduction of the Eritrean thaler by the Italians in neighbouring Eritrea. This thaler, locally known as *birr*—Amharic for silver—was coined by the Mint of Paris and bore the symbols of the monarchy: a portrait of the Emperor and the lion of Judah. Despite the authority of the Emperor, the Menelik thaler never became popular and its circulation remained limited to the empire’s main commercial towns such as Addis Ababa, Harra and Diredawa (Pallaver, 2018b: 103–4). One of the reasons for this failure was that, similarly to the Eritrean thaler, it contained less silver than the Maria Theresa thaler.

However, the main reason was the degree of trust that international traders had in the MTT. This coin was well known, easily recognizable, and contained a fixed amount of silver. It allowed traders in the Horn of Africa to deal with their counterparts in other areas of the Red Sea region or the Indian Ocean using a currency that was recognized and accepted beyond national and imperial borders. The MTT could not be replaced by a coin that circulated only locally such as the Menelik or Eritrean thaler, even if promoted by local rulers. The MTT’s value was established on the basis of the value quoted for thalers in Aden and was thus independent of the borders of the colony or the Ethiopian empire (Pallaver, 2018b: 104).

During the First World War, the Italian authorities decided to introduce another thaler. This time it was called not the Eritrean but the Italian thaler. Mindful of the failure of the Eritrean thaler, the Ministry of the Colonies decided to mint a coin with the same silver content as the MTT and an external appearance as similar as

possible in terms of size and design to the Austrian thaler. A series of studies were carried out “with particular care and with great love” by the Undersecretary of State, Foscari, to choose the most suitable coin for the colony’s needs (Pallaver, 2018b: 109). An analysis of the decision-making process that led to the formulation of the coin design is particularly interesting because it illustrates the symbolic and practical elements that were considered important by the colonial state to ensure that the new coins would be accepted and, at the same time, function as an instrument to promote Italian authority and its symbols. At the same time, however, it also highlights the fact that these elements, emblematic of how the colonial state wanted to represent itself and considered so important and effective at home, were actually completely disconnected from the reality of the colony.

The first proposal was to depict, in the place of Empress Maria Theresa, an image the Italian authorities conceived as the “personification of Eritrea”. On the basis of the numismatic tradition of the Roman provinces—whose coins bore personifications of Africa or Libya—it was suggested that the coins show a young woman in a “matronly or even Amazonian” costume, embellished with tufts of dura, dum palm fruit and coffee. Analogously to the design of other colonial coins discussed in the previous section, here again we see a combination of Italian symbols and African elements. These related to what Mwangi (2002) has defined “cash crop representation” that is to say the representation on coins and banknotes of the products exported by the colonial economy rather than objects which might genuinely speak to African currency users.

One of the earliest proposed sketches therefore envisaged the representation of Eritrea in the form of a female bust, meant to express “artistically and clearly the ethnic and political entity constituted by Eritrea” (Mariani, 1918: 6). However, when the first sketches were considered, it was decided that the image of Eritrea was too different from that of Maria Theresa—the portrait of the Empress was defined “a noble image”, meaning that the personification of Eritrea was not (*ibidem*: 8). It was therefore deemed more appropriate to represent, in a feminine form, the nation with the authority to issue the coin and that demanded the respect of those using it: Italy. In the words of Lucio Mariani—an archaeologist who headed the archaeological services at the Ministry of the Colonies and was in charge of evaluating the most suitable design for the thaler—this solution would have ensured that African populations embraced the new coin in the same way they “loved the pompous image of the empress on the Austrian thaler” (*ibidem*). The personification of Italy, intended to resemble Maria Theresa, was therefore depicted on the obverse of the new coin. The reverse bore an eagle, a symbol of both Italy and Austria that was viewed as particularly important for facilitating the circulation of the new coin among Africans: in the Red Sea, in fact, the Austrian thaler was known as the “eagle thaler”. It was also suggested that the cross on the Savoy coat of arms be replaced with a star, to avoid offending Muslims; however, this would have represented an unprecedented move to change and adapt the symbols of the royal house to those of the colony, and so the cross was retained.

To make the new thaler resemble the MTT as closely as possible, the authorities even decided to avoid using the most modern presses for minting in favour of an

old, 18th-century minting die in the belief that this would make the coins look less “industrial” and more similar to the MTT. In terms of silver content, the new coin was slightly higher than the Maria Theresa thaler.

In May 1918, the Italian thaler was introduced. Many hopes were pinned on the new currency, both actual and symbolic. However, the Italian thaler failed to replace the MTT. Even though its creators intended for the new thaler to imitate the Maria Theresa one, it differed in too many details. Such details were of extreme importance to those who used the thaler because they served to verify its authenticity and were therefore key to underpinning confidence in this coin. For example, Maria Theresa thalers were rejected when the coins had deteriorated to the point that certain details could no longer be clearly distinguished, such as the clasp on the Empress’ shoulder or the pearls that made up the diadem on her head: these details were used to assess how long the coin had been in circulation and check its authenticity. Precisely because it differed from the Habsburg thaler, therefore, the Italian thaler could not be used in trade with surrounding regions. The long-distance trade flows and their currencies that had developed prior to the European colonization of Africa proved difficult to control and were not necessarily influenced by the borders created by the Europeans and their currencies. In the end, only 550,000 examples of the Italian thaler were produced (Pallaver, 2018b: 113).

The case of colonial Eritrea shows the colonial state’s limited reach in a context where a currency was already being used before colonization and the design and symbols of this previously established currency determined the trust its users had in it within and beyond the Italian empire. At the same time, the way the Italian colonial state wanted to represent itself was entirely self-referential and thus had no real chance of competing with the MTT, which continued to circulate in the colonies for the entire duration of Italian colonial rule.

Money and Freedom: Minting Coins for Newly Independent States

Together with a national flag and national anthem, the introduction of a new currency was a potent symbol of independence. Considering banknotes were still not commonly used in Africa at the time of independence, an exploration of the symbols used for the new coins might be revealing of that particular moment of transition and the specific messages African leaders wanted to convey to the people.

The first step was generally to replace portraits of European kings and queens with those of the new rulers. A case in point is the first sub-Saharan country to obtain independence, Ghana. In 1958, one year after independence, the Ghana pound was introduced. A few years later, in 1965, the national currency was changed with the introduction of the *cedi*. The new currency was used both to mark and celebrate Ghana’s independence and to fuel Kwame Nkrumah’s cult of personality. Through the images on this currency, the first president of Ghana wanted to present himself as

the Founding Father of the nation. The coins thus bore the Latin inscription “Civitatīs Ghanienſis Conditor”, “founder of the state of Ghana”. As Harcourt Fuller reports, for Nkrumah this was a way to show to people who could not read and write that they had become truly independent and that an African like themselves was the new ruler (Fuller, 2015: 35, 39).

The symbols used on coins were often similar to those of the colonial period, featuring elements of African flora and fauna. The new symbols used on coins were drawn from precolonial commodity currencies. For example, the Ghanaian cedi—a word meaning cowrie shell in the Akan language—had an image of a cowrie shell. Similarly, in the Republic of Guinea, small denomination coins were called *cauris* (cowries in French) and the coins bore the image of a cowrie shell. When the Katanga region separated from Congo in 1961, it issued its own currency. This was called the *franc* and had bananas on the obverse with Katanga crosses on the reverse. Depicting precolonial currencies on coins clearly would have been inconceivable during the colonial period, as colonial coins were specifically meant to move away from the forms of money that Europeans deemed “primitive”. As with the choice of new names for independent states—such as Ghana for the former British colony of the Gold Coast—using precolonial symbols on coins was a way to build and reinforce a new identity that had its roots in the history of Africa before European colonization.

As Marten and Kula (2008) have shown, the names chosen for the new currencies were also significant in terms of the profound link between language and national identity. Names were sometimes in African languages, such as *ngwee* in Zambia, *kwacha* in Malawi, *thebe* and *pula* in Botswana, *loti* in Lesotho, *lilangeni* in Swaziland, *kwanza* in Angola, *iraimbilanja* and *ariary* in Madagascar, *rand* in South Africa and the already-mentioned *cedi* in Ghana. Several countries opted for currency names in European languages. For example, several former French and Belgian colonies still use coins called *francs*. In some cases, both languages have been used: in Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania, for example, both the English *shilling* and Swahili *shilingi* have been maintained. Some countries use dollars and cents, such as Liberia, Namibia and Zimbabwe (Marten & Kula, 2008: 186–8). Currencies are also named after important historical places. For example, the *nakfa* in Eritrea is named after the town hosting the headquarters of the Eritrean independence movement, and the name of the Zambian *kwacha*, meaning “dawn”, was a slogan during the Zambian independence movement (Marten & Kula, 2008: 188).

As Catherine Eagleton argues in one of the very few studies that exist on the symbolism of African independent states’ coins, “the choice of imagery on currency was limited by domestic, regional and international political realities in much the same way that the newly independent countries’ broader economic policies were conditioned by global economic forces” (Eagleton, 2016: 224). The representation of African leaders has also become sensitive in certain cases. For example, following ethnic electoral violence in Kenya in 2007–8, it was established by law that no presidents or political leaders could be depicted on Kenyan coins. They were replaced by more neutral African animals.

Conclusion

Currency is issued by a state and brings into circulation images that are routinely seen—but rarely looked at—by the people using it (Mwangi, 2001). Coins have symbols that create links between a nation and its citizens or, in the case of a colonial state, its subjects. This chapter has focused on the symbols that African and European colonial states put on their coins, the diversified meanings they sought to convey, and how these meanings changed over time. By analysing coin-based imaginaries, symbolism and representations, this chapter has explored the epistemological and methodological value of currency objects for studying Africa's past. Research on precolonial coins from Axum and the Swahili coast has shown that they are important not only as chronological markers and a way to map trading connections, but also to reconstruct the self-image that issuing authorities wanted to convey to both their own people and their international trading partners. During the colonial period, coins were minted with European national references as a means of promoting the symbols of the new rulers and creating a new link of authority with African currency users. As we have seen with the case of holes in coins or the Islamic symbols used in British West Africa, however, these symbols had to be adapted to respond to local monetary practices and symbols. An analysis of the Eritrean case and the decision-making process that led to the design of the new coin is particularly interesting because it reveals the symbolic and practical elements that were considered important by the colonial state to ensure that the new coins would be accepted and, at the same time, serve as an instrument to promote Italian authority and its symbols. At the same time, however, it also highlights how these elements, considered important and effective at home and emblematic of how the colonial state wished to represent itself, were completely disconnected from the (symbolic) reality of the colony. Overall, coins from Africa represent an important source for studying the history of the African continent over the long term. Their design, text and images can contribute to the interpretation of African social, religious and political realities.

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Photography of Colonial Libya in the Former Fototeca del Museo Africano: A Provisional Appraisal



Federico Cresti

Abstract In recent decades, methodological reflections addressed—sometimes from different points of view and with conflicting positions—the historiographical meaning and value of iconographic documents, and in particular of photography. Historians of Africa have played a role that can be defined as pioneering both in this debate and in the use of photographic material as a source for their studies. For this reason, since the 1970s publications on “African” photographic collections have multiplied. The Italian archival heritage in this area—which largely concerns Italian former colonies—has long been forgotten and in some cases even reduced to bad conditions by neglect and disinterest. The most significant photographic collection on Africa in Italy is undoubtedly the one kept in the Central National Library in Rome, which some time ago inherited the library and archival materials of the Italian Institute for Africa and the Orient (IsIAO) that includes several photos. In this paper, I will focus on the Libya fund, that is made up by different types of photographic material: photographic plates on glass (negative and positive), printed photographs, slides and other material. Being the first description and analysis of this fund, the chapter raises questions about the use of photographic material for the study of the history of Libya as well as of the Italian colonial period at large.

Keywords Libya · Photography · Museum · Colonialism · Italy

African Photographies and History

In recent decades, methodological reflection on history has addressed, sometimes from different points of view and with conflicting positions, the meaning and value of iconographic documents, and in particular photography, as a tool and source material

F. Cresti (✉)
University of Catania, Catania, Italy
e-mail: fed.cresti@gmail.com

for knowledge.¹ Historians of Africa have played a pioneering role both in this debate and in the use of photographic material as a source for their studies (Forlacroix, 1970; Geary, 1986), and since the 1970s publications on “African” photographic collections have multiplied.²

The Italian archival heritage in this field—largely related to our country’s colonial history—has long been forgotten, and in some cases has been reduced to a state of disrepair by neglect and disinterest³; however, especially since the 1980s, there has been a resumption of studies, with initiatives linked to the world of academic research, resulting in scientific publications, but above all in the reorganisation and cataloguing of some interesting collections (Goglia, 1985; Palma, 1986; Triulzi, 1988, 1989).

Undoubtedly, the most important (in terms of quantity) photographic collection in our country is the one kept at the National Central Library in Rome, which some time ago took over the library and archival material (maps and photo library) of the former Italian Institute for Africa and the Orient (IsIAO). The history of this photographic library is known in its broad outlines: its best reconstruction was made by Silvana Palma, who worked for a long time to rearrange it, producing a very accurate catalogue of the Eritrea-Ethiopia collection, in a volume of almost seven hundred pages (Palma, 2005).⁴

The photographic collection of the IsIAO began to take shape from the first documentary core of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which already existed in the penultimate decade of the nineteenth century.⁵ The Colonial Museum, inaugurated in 1923 in the Ministry of Colonies in the Palazzo della Consulta in Rome—but only opened to the public in 1932, in a new location built in the area of the Villa Borghese’s zoological garden—inherited the first photographic collection of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, adding other collections in the course of its activity. It was mainly in the second half of the 1930s that the Fototeca del Museo Africano (or Colonial Museum Photographic Library) began to develop its organic structure, accumulating material and organising it into different series and collections (as evidenced by the stamps, index

¹ As for the Italian writings, see Bollati (1979), Ortoleva (1983). Goglia (1996) is a useful reference, also of a bibliographic nature. Nicola Labanca dedicated important reflections to the knot between photography, self-representation and memory in the colonial experience: among his numerous works on photography in the colonies it’s worth mentioning Labanca (2002).

² Goglia (1996: 814–15) defines as the “beginning of a turning point in the historical studies of Africa” the seminar held at SOAS in London in May 1988, publishing its acts during the same year (Roberts 1988; see also Killingray & Roberts, 1989).

³ But I would like to mention at least one commendably contrary case: the photo library of the Istituto Agronomico per l’Oltremare [IAO] (formerly Istituto Agricolo Coloniale) in Florence, which contains a very important photographic fund on Italian colonies. Considered as a working tool for the activity of that institute (thanks above all to its first director, Armando Maugini, a very good photographer), well preserved and cataloged, and finally made available to scholars, the photographic material of the IAO runs through the history of Italian agricultural colonization and its influence on subsequent territorial transformations.

⁴ This work is the result of a research project on colonial photographic collections under the direction of Alessandro Triulzi.

⁵ Silvana Palma hypothesizes that “the first images of Africa to reach the Ministry of Foreign Affairs could be those made by Nicotra Bros in 1887–1888, after the battle of Dogali” (Palma, 2005: 17n39).

cards and captions that accompany a large part of the photographic documentation). Unfortunately, it has not yet been possible to find complete catalogues and inventories of these collections. According to the plans of the Fascist government at the end of the 1930s, the photographic library of the African Museum should have become the collection and distribution point for the propaganda of photographic material on the African colonies, also available from other institutional bodies (such as the Ministry of Popular Culture and the Istituto LUCE) or developed by them. Even from the overseas territories, local administrations should be expected to send photographic documentation of public works and other significant aspects of the Italian presence, while colonial officials and members of the armed forces should be invited to donate their “African” photographic collections to the museum, enriching its documentary and memorial patrimony (Goglia, 1996: 879–82; Palma, 2005: 19–20).

The short period that separated the project from the outbreak of the war did not allow it to be fully realised. The museum was closed during the conflict and in 1953, with the suppression of the Italian Ministry for Africa, its scientific and cultural material was transferred to the Italian Institute for Africa, which was to operate in the same location. Palma (2005: 16) sums up the institutional trajectory of “what can rightly be considered the largest existing visual memory of Italian colonialism”: but, passing over the events of the Italian Institute for Africa (later the Italian-African Institute and, still later, the Institute for Africa and the East), to conclude the course, it is necessary to recall that since January 2012, with the suppression of the IsIAO—or its “forced administrative liquidation” for reasons related to its bankruptcy with a political decision that demonstrated the great cultural short-sightedness of the government of the time, and in particular of the Minister of Foreign Affairs under whose aegis the IsIAO operated—the photo library and all the other scientific apparatus of the Institute remained closed until 2018. In that year the Photographic Library was transferred to the National Central Library in Rome and reopened, with some restrictions, to scholars and the public. It was thus possible to resume a work begun in 2009 and interrupted by the suppression of the IsIAO: the cataloguing of the series of volumes of the Libya Fund of the Photographic Library of the former African Museum.⁶

The Libya Fund consists of various types of photographic material: photographic plates on glass (negative and positive), printed photographs, slides and other material on film. It is not yet possible to give a precise quantitative dimension to all this material: it will only be possible to do so once the survey of the entire deposit has been completed, which is still in progress and has been interrupted once again by

⁶ Alessia Melcangi participated in the cataloguing work of 2009. My inorganic incursions into this photographic collection began in the early 1980s as part of a research on the territorial and urban transformations of the territories of Mediterranean Africa in the colonial era, for which the iconographic sources and photographs were an element of fundamental importance (see Cresti (1987) with some photographs of this photo library). The incursions continued later in the framework of a research on the villages of the Italian agricultural colonization in Libya (which also produced some articles on the documentation of the IsIAO photo library: *La Libia nella colonizzazione agricola nell'archivio fotografico dell'Istituto italiano per l'Africa e l'Oriente. I nuovi villaggi della Cirenaica*, “Africa”, LXIV, 3–4, 379–401, part I; LXV, 1–4, 234–267, part II.

the recent pandemic and the measures taken to combat it, which led, among other things, to the closure of the Central National Library.

The Libya Fund volume series consists of 151 albums (generally bound) and folders (generally containing photographs or detached sheets). Due to their similarity in shape and size and the homogeneity of their contents, they can be divided into the following three groups or sub-series: first sub-series: thematic albums 1910–1940 (volumes 1–79); second sub-series: World War II –Libyan Front (volumes 80 to 134)⁷; and third sub-series—large format albums (volumes 135–151).⁸

In this article, which is a preliminary summary of a work in progress that I offer to Irma Taddia, who has devoted part of her fruitful activity as an African historian to the collection and study of primary sources, I will concentrate on some general considerations concerning the first sub-series.

Fototeca del Museo Africano, Libya Fund. Volumes' First Sub-series: Thematic Albums 1910–1943

The Thematic Albums 1910–1940 comprise a total of more than 7000 photographs taken between 1910 and the beginning of the Second World War.⁹ As regards the reference period, it is interesting to note that there are a small number of albums (5) of photographs from the pre-colonial period, taken in 1910 and 1911, before the Italian landing in Libya. The formation of this sub-series, which also includes a donation from the 1950s, is difficult to reconstruct from the available data. I will try to define some of its characteristics, some of which have already been identified in previous studies.

Some of the albums are gifts to high state authorities or institutions that later joined the photo library. The first case is that of the five albums entitled *Libya in the Last Hour of Turkish Rule. A Photographic Review*.¹⁰ They are made up of photographs taken

⁷ The second subseries collects about 12,500 photographs by the Special Photographic Section of the Command of the Armed Forces in North Africa, within albums of the same shape and size (but different from the other volumes), and with a collection chronologically progressive of events between October 1939 and September 1942.

⁸ The third subseries brings together around 1350 large format photographs (up to 50 × 60 cm) of different subjects (anthropology, panoramic and environment photos, agricultural colonization, armed forces, etc.), with some graphics, topographic and thematic maps on different topics (fishing, health...).

⁹ The albums of the first two subseries are located in the metal cabinet n. 12 of the current warehouse at the National Library, while for reasons of space and size the large format binders of the third subseries are separated within the same warehouse. For the catalog, I provisionally adopt here the abbreviation AM (Armadio Metallico, or metal cabinet) followed by the progressive number.

¹⁰ Albums AM1 to AM5. A different title, in a hand-decorated caption, appears on the frontispieces of the first (*Nella Tripolitania Sirtica e Cirenaica. Missione governativa nel 1910. Giugno-luglio-agosto*) and the second volume (*Nella Tripolitania. Missione del Banco di Roma nel 1911 e 1912*). The photo of the title page of the second volume, together with two others of panoramas of the mission camps, is published by De Rosa (1982: phot. 78–80).

during two missions to Libya led by Ignazio Sanfilippo and Michele Sforza. Ignazio Sanfilippo, a Sicilian sulphur entrepreneur, was sent to Libya in 1910 by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on a “first very secret mission” (De Rosa, 1982: 297) to find out if there were any interesting mineral deposits for industrial exploitation. But also to provide useful material for an Italian intervention (as evidenced by the photographs of the coast in one of the albums) and to make contact with local personalities for the same purpose. A second mission (in which Michele Sforza was deputy chief), financed by the Bank of Rome, began the following year. Surprised by the outbreak of the Italian-Turkish war in the area, all its members were arrested and released after the peace of Ouchy (15 October 1912).

The five albums are the photographic documentation of the two missions: the first contains the photographs of the first mission and the other four those of the second. Several copies of these albums were made, some of which were given to government officials: two copies were attached to the manuscript report for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and for the Banco di Roma, one was given to King Vittorio Emanuele III and one to the Minister for the Colonies, Pietro Bertolini (Ferrara, 2006: 74, 111).¹¹ The copy we are talking about is probably that of the Minister for the Colonies, while the King’s copy is in the Royal Library of Turin¹² and that of the Banco di Roma is in the latter’s archives.¹³ The photographs are mainly of a landscape nature and document the entire Tripolitan course of the missions (up to the captivity in Murzuk): unfortunately, there are no pictures of the archaeological site of Leptis Magna, which appears in the captions but which was almost completely plundered.

A second example, to be included in the category of *donations*, is an album that originally contained 555 photographs, now reduced to 429¹⁴: the photographer (and author of the album, which includes very precise and interesting captions under each photograph, sometimes with precise dates) is Alfredo Alemanni, who wrote this dedication in beautiful calligraphy in 1913:

This photographic work of mine, carried out in Libya
in the first years of the occupation, I offer to
Your Excellency the Minister of War
so that it may remain to demonstrate beautifully
what Italy has achieved with the value of weapons and
the generous blood of the Italian soldier.
Florence 20 September 1913
Alfredo Alemanni

¹¹ The photographs were printed by “Enrico Melendez Photographic Studio” in Palermo (Ferrara, 2006: 108).

¹² See Triulzi (1989). In the Catalogue of this book, three volumes are mentioned (and not five), for a total of 427 photographs, while the original total of our five volumes, based on the indexes, is of 608.

¹³ See Goglia (1996: 847n99). Other photographs of these albums are reproduced by Ferrara (2006).

¹⁴ AM9 and AM10: several archaeological photos are missing, in particular of Leptis Magna.

Former Controller of the Military Fund in Homs.¹⁵

The Libyan *photographic* activity of Captain Alemanni (author of about 2500 photographs collected in various albums, some of which were printed and reproduced by magazines) is well known: part of his production was destined for the Ministry of Education (160 photographs of the archaeological site of Leptis Magna) and part for the Ministry of Colonies (600 photographs). A third album, according to a report published in a magazine in September 1913, was “prepared [...] at the request of the General Staff of the Army”.¹⁶ It is possible to hypothesise that this last album was made on the basis of the photographs offered to the Minister of War, which focus mainly on landscapes and notable buildings—particularly in Homs, Sliten, Tripoli, Misurata, Azizia—but also on characters, military and personalities, religious ceremonies, traditional types and customs.¹⁷

Also, a later album (with the title on the cover: *Impressions and Memories of Benghazi 1912*), offered to Giovanni Giolitti in March 1913 by Placido Corigliano—an unspecified “entrepreneur” of Villa San Giovanni—is also part of the series of documentary photographs that arrived at the photographic library as a gift to a government figure. The photographs in this album are mainly panoramas of Benghazi in the period immediately after the naval bombardment and occupation of 1911 (the ruins of the bombed buildings are visible in some of the images), together with images of the troops (particularly the native troops), of official and native ceremonies.¹⁸

Another gift (this time not to a government figure, but to the Neapolitan section of the Italian Institute for Africa) is an album commemorating the occupation of Giarabub/Jaghbub in February 1926. The *ksar* of Jaghbub—one of the main *zawaiya* of the Sanusi Brotherhood, considered its first “holy city” as the residence of its founder, whose tomb is there—was occupied by a motorised column following the 1925 border agreements with Egypt, which assigned it to Cyrenaica. In this section of the Photographic Library there are two other albums very similar to this one,¹⁹

¹⁵ A second album (AM10, dated August 1913) contains a lower number of photos (347), largely copies of the previous one.

¹⁶ *La pregevole opera di un fiorentino per il Ministero delle Colonie*, “La Vita militare”, 1–16, Sept. 1913, (4), p. 19, quoted by Mazzei (2018: 330n29) which recalls “a further printed collection of twenty plates [...] A. Alemanni, *Ricordi della Libia: album n. 1*, Ed. Formidabile, Lurate Abbiate 1914”. Interesting is Mazzei’s hypothesis, based on the quality of the photos, that Alemanni owned a piece of uncommon photographic equipment and not one of the simple Kodaks of many officers-photographers (*ibidem*: n26).

¹⁷ In the second album is the image of the “soldato italiano ‘buono’ per definizione, che nutre della sua gavetta di pasta asciutta l’affamata bambina araba [the Italian soldier ‘good’ by definition, who feeds the hungry Arab girl on his pasta mess-tin]” quoted by (Goglia, 1996: 852–53). Another image of the same album is published by Palma (1999: 184–85). Alemanni’s second album contains a summary of the subjects of the photographs: “War Tripolitania Homs; Railway construction—roads—pier—surrounding wall; war memorials; Tripoli and different residences; Christian Churches—Mosques—Synagogues—Marabouts; Vegetation cultivation different specialities; inhabitants’ customs—schools—weddings—market—Arab holidays—merchants; Lebda Museum of Homs”.

¹⁸ AM13, containing 61 of 63 original photos.

¹⁹ AM16 and AM17, with unbound photos.

although some parts are missing, while this one is complete with its 144 photographs. This album seems to have belonged to the “Cyrenaica Troops Command—General Staff”, according to a circular stamp on the first page and was donated on 23 July 1955 by Colonel Guido Bauer.²⁰ One of its most interesting features is a group of aerial photographs and collages of zenith aerial photographs, probably used in the preparation of the expedition. While the aerial photos were undoubtedly taken by the photographic services of the Air Force, almost all of the *on the ground* snapshots seem to be the work of “C[arlo] Rimoldi Esq. Bengasi Photographic Studio”, as attested in a printed advertisement in the album.²¹

“To Duce, his High Patron the Autonomous Body of the Tripoli Fair” is the dedication of an album presented to the Head of Government in 1936 on the occasion of the 10th Tripoli Fair, containing almost 70 photographs by Luigi Costa, a professional who had his studio in Tripoli in the 1930s, and whose name appears in the stamp at the bottom of each photograph.²² The main subjects are the pavilions of the exhibition (in which Egypt and the French Saharan territories also took part that year). There are also some of the official ceremonies and the visits of important personalities, such as Maria José, the wife of the heir to the throne Umberto, gallantly accompanied by the governor Italo Balbo, and her husband, much less conspicuous.²³

Two albums containing mainly photographs from the years 1914 to 1917, relating to the area of Derna and some military expeditions, such as that of the Miani Column in the Fezzan, are perhaps among the aforementioned donations collected in the late 1930s.²⁴ The donor and photographer was General Gualtiero Santini,²⁵ who at the time of these photographs was a lieutenant of the 9th Libyan Company (1914), then commander of the first company of the 9th Libyan-Eritrean Battalion (1916) with the rank of captain. It is an “album of memories” (one of the first photographs in the second album is of a beautiful girl “en déshabillé”, without any caption), in which postcards and market photographs are placed alongside the photographs taken by the officer.²⁶ In addition to military subjects (these albums contain many photographs with captions and details of the officers and graduates of the local armed forces stationed in the Derna region at the time), the albums also contain images of towns, inhabited places and landscapes in the early years of the Italian occupation, as well

²⁰ AM18, first page. Unlike the previous two, this album is made up of bound sheets.

²¹ See Goglia (1996: 859n126). According to the catalog of S. Palma, an album on the occupation of Jaghbūb is also in the Royal Library of Turin.

²² AM57.

²³ A LUCE newsreel on this edition of the Tripoli Fair (B0850, 18 marzo 1936 - *Tripoli: La Decima Fiera Campionaria di Tripoli alla presenza di Balbo*) is easily electronically available.

²⁴ AM63, AM64 (totaling 402 photos). A typewritten plate pasted on the cover of the two albums reveals it as a donation.

²⁵ Who probably reached the rank of General in the second half of the 1930s, after Ethiopia's campaign (during the World War II he was Brigadier General, and after 8 September he was interned in the prison camp of Shocken): that would make the gift go back to a few years before the outbreak of the Second World War.

²⁶ Some attributable, thanks to stamps and inscriptions on the back: “Pirotta e Bresciano/Tripoli”; “Cartolina postale/carte postale/Tunisi”; “Ripro vietata / Fotog. Chiaramonte”.

as some very rare images (the only ones in existence, as far as I know) of the group of militarised Libyan workers who came to Italy from Cyrenaica to fight in the First World War: This group was stationed in Montecelio, near Rome,²⁷ probably under the command of the then Captain Santini.

A third album, donated by General Santini himself (at that time he was a colonel), contains photographs of the passage of the Metauro Division through Tripoli in 1935,²⁸ on its way to the Ethiopian front in October of that year. Accompanying various military ceremonies in the presence of Italo Balbo, the photographs in this album (some of which were probably bought on the local market) are particularly interesting for some rare shots of the city of Tripoli and its surroundings.

It is not surprising that, among the albums donated by officer-photographers,²⁹ the majority are of military subjects (troops, operations, buildings, ceremonies, etc.): apart from the group already examined, these subjects make up a large part, perhaps the largest part, of the photographs in this sub-section.³⁰ The albums dedicated to military operations for the conquest of territories, both in the early years of the colonial enterprise until the outbreak of the First World War and in the Fascist period, are of particular importance, not only quantitatively.³¹ Apart from the pictures taken during some of these operations by official photographers, in several cases professional photographers come into play, attached to the expeditions with the mission of documenting their various stages and the most important events.³² Among the signatories of these reportages (which, thanks to professional equipment, offer images

²⁷ Santini's photos refer to the eleventh echelon of Libyan workers, which was sent in December 1917 to the Montecelio Air Force Commissary's Office (see Mozzati (2001: 92), where Montecelio is erroneously indicated as Montecchio), probably to work on the airfield. See also Cresti (2002). Some of these photos bear the stamp on the back: "11° reparto lavoratori libici/Comando". The photo library preserves an entire album created by the Ansaldo Company (AM28), with 42 photographs of the first group, arrived in July 1917 to work on the foundries of Sampierdarena.

²⁸ AM75 (79 photographs): "Guerra Italo-Abissina / 1935 / La Divisione 'Metauro' in A[f]rica S[ettentrionale]".

²⁹ To those already mentioned (Santini and Alemanni) we must add: Captain Pietro Afan De Rivera, with an album of views of Misurata and surroundings dated July 1912–April 1913 (AM55); Captain De Marchi, with photographs of Benghazi and its surroundings in 1912 (AM20); Captain Negri, author of the photographs of an album dedicated to the "Avanzi romani negli Orfella [Roman remains in Orfella]" (AM60), with some images of the mausoleums of Ghirza and the surrounding region. The cover and format of the first two albums, very similar, suggest a series, probably for the market.

³⁰ It also includes two albums of the solely military subject (buildings and troops), respectively Saharan fortresses and redoubts in the 1920s and 1930s (AM37) and training maneuvers of colonial troops in 1939 (AM72). These photos are probably by specialized departments of the armed forces: however, on some appear the names of Giuseppe Pucci and a "Fot. Giorgini", who signs also some photos in another 1924 album, with photographs of inhabited centres in Tripolitania (AM21).

³¹ Tassoni Column, 1912 (AM11); occupation of Jaghbūb, 1926 (AM16, AM17, AM18); occupation of Augila and Gialo, 1928 (AM19); Miani Column and occupation of Shaati, 1913–1914 (AM66, AM67, AM68); Graziani expedition and occupation of Cufra, 1930–1931 (AM39, AM40, AM41).

³² See Della (1980: 72), Goglia (1996: 848n101). Photography as a strategic information tool during the conquest was used by Air Force since 1911: in addition to a more directly military interest, the aerial photographs in these albums are very important for the history of the urban transformations of Libya in colonial times. We know the name of two Air Force photographers, marked on a 1932

of rare sharpness and sometimes of a quality that we would dare to call artistic) is the specialist battalion of the Engineer Corps, led by Captain Carletti, who in 1913 accompanied the Tassoni Column throughout its journey through Cyrenaica, from Marsa Susa to Barce.³³ This photographic campaign, which ran parallel to the military one, presents rare images of the site of Cyrene and many other archaeological remains of the Classical period encountered along the way and testifies to the interest in ancient ruins (evidence of a past in which this territory was “ours”, on which the Roman legions returned to march) that can be found more or less in all photographic collections on Libya during the colonial period.

Another specialised corps of the Armed Forces (Command and Military Engineer of Cyrenaica/Photo Service) signed the photographs contained in some albums of the Sahara regions at the time of the expedition to Cufra (1930–1931), commanded by General Rodolfo Graziani. These photographs are collected in a series of albums, homogeneous in material and format, with a common title on each album (*In the Italian Sahara. Views-Types-Costumes*), originally made up of at least 18 albums, 16 of which are present in this photo library. The collection, which seems to have been made by the Military Geographical Institute of Florence and dates back to 1934 at the earliest,³⁴ is made up of photographs only partially belonging to the Cufra expedition.³⁵ The most recent albums contain photographs of the scientific missions carried out in the Libyan Sahara after the conquest: Among these are the missions of Ardito Desio (who in 1931 and 1932 entered the eastern Sahara, first in northern Cyrenaica, from the coast to Jaghbūb, then from Porto Bardia to Cufra, in search of hydrocarbon deposits—AM49), and the one under the command of Captain Oreste Marchesi of the IGM, who was in charge of carrying out topographic surveys in the border region with Egypt, south of Cufra.³⁶

Another noticeable part of the volumes is the ceremonies held on the occasion of important events in the history of the colony. For example, the meetings between Governor De Martino and Idris al-Sanusi, which led to the signing of the al-Rajma/Er Régima agreements on 25 October 1920 (and the subsequent celebrations in

photo of a Saharan landing field: Sergeant Major photographer Pietro Rambaldi and Lieutenant Marco Giuliano (AM41).

³³ AM11.

³⁴ The last album of this group (number 18), contains the photographs of the “Collection [Edoardo] Zavattari”, named after the biologist who led a mission of the IGM in the Cyrenaican Sahara in 1934 (see Zavattari, 1935: 42–4).

³⁵ AM38 to AM43, AM48.

³⁶ AM50. Ludovico di Caporiaccio, who later described it in a book, took part in the mission (di Caporiaccio 1934).

Benghazi on the occasion of the emir's departure for Italy),³⁷ or the visits of illustrious personalities.³⁸ Other albums contain images of the activities of public and private institutions (such as the Cassa di Risparmio della Cirenaica),³⁹ the railway administration (such as the State Railways in the early years of the conquest⁴⁰ and later the Tripolitania Government Railways),⁴¹ the school and the health administration.⁴² The latter album contains photographic material for the medical section of the Vatican International Missionary Exposition of 1924–1925,⁴³ part of the group of albums containing illustrations of colonial-themed exhibitions and displays in Libya,⁴⁴ Italy⁴⁵ or abroad.⁴⁶

Curiously, in the section we are analysing, there is only a marginal presence of photographs with an economic (agricultural or industrial) theme or linked to the achievements of the Fascist regime, which were widely publicised, especially during the period of Italo Balbo's governorship (1934–1940): an album of 60 photographs

³⁷ AM24, AM25, AM70, with photographs of two of Cyrenaica's best-known professional studios: those of Carlo Rimoldi and Gaetano Nascia. On the activity of these photographers in Cyrenaica see Goglia (1996: 858–9); for an in-depth reconstruction of the life and work of Gaetano Nascia in Benghazi, based on unpublished family documents and accompanied by many photographs, see Prestopino (1999).

³⁸ The Prince of Piedmont in Benghazi, 1921 (AM12); Minister Federzoni in Tripolitania, 1924 (AM24); Mussolini in Tripoli, 1926 (AM23bis). The already mentioned album dedicated to the Tripoli Fair of 1936 (AM57) also gives ample space to the visit of the Royal princes Umberto and Maria José. Except for the AM12 album (with photos by Carlo Rimoldi), the names of the authors of the photos of the official visits do not appear.

³⁹ It is a printed volume (*Relazione sull'andamento della Cassa di risparmio della Cirenaica dalla fondazione ad oggi*, Bengasi, 30 Nov.1931) containing 265 photographs attached.

⁴⁰ AM6 e AM7 (1911–1914), of which some photographs have been published by Maggi (1996: 81–98).

⁴¹ AM8 (with some photographs dated 1922–23).

⁴² AM29, AM30, AM31. The last of these volumes, in addition to a series of 48 photos, contains a typewritten report on *L'istruzione pubblica in Tripolitania*, signed by "Soprintendente scolastico Angelo Piccioli" (March 1931). Not all the authors of the photos in these albums (representing almost totally school groups and school buildings) are identifiable. Some photos show embossed stamps with the names of Giuseppe Pucci and Filippo Muzi, who had their offices in Tripoli in the 1920s and 1930s.

⁴³ AM54 (1924), with graphics, data, photographic, and printed material of the Government of Cyrenaica Bacteriological and Micrographic Health Laboratory on leprosy, plague, and mortality, as well as on traditional medicine in Cyrenaica.

⁴⁴ The second Tripoli trade fair of 1928 (AM61) and the aforementioned fair of 1936 (AM57).

⁴⁵ The Exposition coloniale of Paris in 1931 (AM58) and the international exhibition of Tokyo in 1939 (AM59, with design schemes of the Italian Libya pavilion). On the Parisian exhibition (where Italy's main pavilion was a reconstruction of the Severian basilica of Leptis Magna), see Reynaud (1931): "Le pavillon du Royaume d'Italie présente l'ensemble de monuments suivant: le pavillon principal, reproduction de la basilique de Leptis Magna en Libye [...] le pavillon de Rhodes, de style médiéval et orné de sept tours [...] une fontaine monumentale, entouré de deux marabouts africains et de tentes de nomades bédouins; un restaurant. Sur le lac naviguent des samboucs (bateaux somaliens)".

⁴⁶ The Roman exhibition on the Colonial book of the Fascist time of 1936 (AM56) and the Milan trade fair of 1926, in which Cyrenaica participated with its pavilion (AM73).

entitled *The Agricultural Development of Cyrenaica* (AM35), with images of private farms in the Benghazi region in the 1920s and 1930s; an album of photographs of construction sites on the Libyan coast in 1935–1936 (AM71), with photographs of Balbo in uniform, colonial helmet and white gloves visiting the works; finally, an album of photographs from the Vittorio La Barbera studio entitled *Industrial Plants of Tripoli 1914* (AM62).

Apart from three irrelevant albums—one with 15 photographs of the headquarters of the Italian Anonymous Industrial Company Buttons in Trescore Balneario (AM76), one with non-photographic material on water research in Tripolitania (AM14), one on the “new indigenous village of ‘Acria’” in Eritrea (AM77)—and a partially irrelevant one,⁴⁷ some illustrated volumes and two photolithographic collections remain to be studied.

An album without any indication (with 100 sheets, each with a caption and photographs belonging to different periods, but not collected together before 1927), with an artistically decorated cover and the title *Tripolitania through the Image* (AM69), may have come from the tourist market. In addition to views of Tripoli and landscapes of the Gefara plain, the subjects of the photographs are mainly the Sahara and villages, with some images of “exotic” female nudes.

To Luca Comerio, “who was undoubtedly the greatest active author in Libya and one of the great names in photography and documentary cinematography [...] of the first twenty years of the century” (Manenti et al., 1979), there are two printed albums with the same title on the cover (different colours) (*Tripolitania and Cyrenaica/Album of 24 Artistic Plates*), but which do not contain the same photographic series. Even though they are not dated, they are images from the first years of the conquest, which Comerio witnessed first-hand when he landed in Tripoli with the occupying troops: in the first album (AM33), the subjects are mainly landscape, while in the second (AM34) they are military (officers, troops and barracks).

“The Album-Portfolio of the Italian-Turkish War 1911–1912 for the Conquest of Libya”, published in 12 editions by Treves in Milan in 1913 (AM65, in a complete hardback edition), belongs to the same period as the previous one, and although it is not strictly consistent with the rest of the photographic material, it is a very rich collection. The photographs reproduced in its 297 pages (each of which contains between one and four photos, probably reaching a thousand), although sometimes not of the best quality, have as their subject the protagonists of the war—politicians and military men from both camps—and its main episodes: they form a history for images without explanatory texts, if not those of brief captions.

Finally, a collection of photographic images intended for publication or already published in printed texts is gathered in two albums with the following headings:

⁴⁷ AM79, with drawings and photographs in loose sheets, including some on East Africa, one with a Saharan topic (panorama of Auenàt), one by the Duke of Abruzzi during an African expedition (undated), one of the expedition to the oases of the 29th parallel North (1929). There is also a photograph (the only one signed) of the “Console Piero Parini Comandante della 221^a Legione ‘Fasci italiani all’estero’”: it was taken by Ghitta Carell (1899–1972), an established portraitist of the fascist epoch, who photographed many important characters of the aristocracy and the regime (see Occhipinti, 1978).

Ministry of the Colonies/Photolithographs [Zincotipie] (AM26, AM27). These are two volumes (the second and the fourth) of a series containing 529 illustrations, sometimes taken from a design, sometimes from a complete article: in the case of volume II, from some of the pamphlets produced on the occasion of the Colonial Exhibition of 1914 in Genoa, which are part of the series: *Monographs and Colonial Relations* series⁴⁸; in Vol. IV, from some of the same series (but dated 1915) and from an essay published in the “Archaeological News of the Ministry of Colonies”⁴⁹; the photographs often bear the authors’ names: for the most part the Roman photographers Calzone and Danesi, in one case the name “E. Chiaromonte”, and sporadically the Photographic Section of the Special Engineer Battalion. These two volumes seem to bear witness to the beginning of a work of organising and cataloguing the photographic iconography of Libya (and perhaps of the other African territories as well) from the early years of the colonial enterprise, which was probably interrupted by the First World War.⁵⁰

Conclusion

At the present stage of the work, it is not easy to perfectly reconstruct the course that brought all the volumes of these sub-series to the Photographic Library. If many volumes bear the indication of a double progressive inventory number, probably belonging to the African Museum Photo Library (starting with the numbers 141/11361 of AM1), many others lack this numbering, whether it has been lost over time with the wear of the materials, whether these albums without numbers were added later or remained in a temporary situation.

On the basis of an incomplete series (part of a series of at least four volumes) of photolithographs of the Ministry of Colonies, we hypothesised that these volumes were the remains of a *first* attempt to catalogue colonial iconography dating back to the first years of the conquest and the creation of the Ministry of Colonies, interrupted by the First World War. At that time, however, the “Photographic Library of the Colonial Museum” did not yet exist, and the photographic material collected before or after its creation was of various origins and was collected by different photographers

⁴⁸ R. Nappi, *Agricoltura, industrie e commercio della Tripolitania*, “Monografie e rapporti coloniali” [from now: MRC] 1/1914; *Le scuole italiane in Tripoli*, MRC 2/1914; G. Marieni, *I lavori del Genio militare in Tripolitania*, MRC 3/1914; R. Simonetti, *Le opere pubbliche della Tripolitania e della Cirenaica progettate e dirette dal genio civile nel primo biennio dell’occupazione (fino al 31 gennaio 1914)*, MRC 4/1914; F. De Vito, *Lavori del Genio Militare in Cirenaica*, MRC, 5/1914; A. Salvadori, *La Cirenaica ed i suoi servizi civili*, MRC, 6/1914.

⁴⁹ F. Stroppa, *Nomadismo e nomadi della Tripolitania (propriamente detta)*, MRC, 1/1915; G. Boni, L. Mariani, *Relazione intorno al consolidamento ed al ripristino dell’arco di M. Aurelio in Tripoli*, “Notiziario Archeologico del Ministero delle Colonie” (off-print, 1915).

⁵⁰ A part of vol. IV is made up of uncut sheets. The photos are progressively numbered (the highest number in vol. IV is 1202), almost always with a handwritten caption: the reference to a missing inventory seems evident.

or institutions (such as the Research Department of the same Ministry of Colonies, the Army General Staff or other military institutions, etc.).

This part of the Libya Fund volumes confirms the importance of non-professional military photographers, especially in the first years of the colonial conquest, for the establishment of the photographic heritage of colonial Libya, but also of the specialised departments of the armed forces, which produced a cognitive material useful not only for military history. As far as the chronology of the albums is concerned, the most conspicuous part belongs to the years of fascism (58 albums), but the part belonging to the period from the beginning of the colonial enterprise to Italy's entry into the First World War is remarkable (13), while the albums of the period 1915–1922 are much less numerous (8) and those of the war period 1915–1918 are almost absent.

Almost eighty years after the end of the Italian colonial period, it is to be hoped that this source of primary importance for the historical knowledge of this tormented country, the Libya Fund of the Photographic Library of the former African Museum in Rome, will finally be reorganised and made available to researchers and scholars.

di Caporiacco (1934) as is the case of the aforementioned and well-known “Cav. C. Rimoldi” of Benghazi in the expedition of Jaghbūb (AM16, AM17, AM18).

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Historical Sources and Political Trajectories

Building the State in Eritrea: Notes on Epistemologies and Sources



Uoldelul Chelati Dirar

Abstract This paper aims to discuss some of the epistemological and methodological issues underpinning the conflicting accounts of Eritrea's path to statehood. Drawing on colonial literature and documents produced by Eritrean nationalist forces, I will assess the extent to which the manipulation of historical sources and the successful hegemonic production of narratives by the victorious EPLF shaped the discourse on Eritrea during the years of the liberation struggle. A fascinating mix of colonial narratives and radical leftist ideologies has conjured up an image of Eritrean nationalism and statehood that has escaped rigorous epistemological scrutiny. In my paper, I argue that Eritrean nationalist leaderships have successfully projected an image of their struggle that aimed to meet Western expectations and stereotypes of the progressive and “civilised” organisation, while pursuing a much more brutal and ruthless policy on the ground. Beyond the specific case of Eritrea, I strongly believe that this analysis can provide crucial insights for a better assessment of the many contradictions that the contemporary African state faces in its complex relations with both its citizens and the international community.

Keywords Eritrea · Nationalism · Statehood · Colonialism · Liberation movements

Introduction

The State of Eritrea, a tiny but assertive polity born out of the ashes of the Cold War geopolitical landscape, remains a puzzling dilemma for political scientists and historians alike. The main reason for this perplexity is the striking contrast between the image of Eritrea projected by the nationalist movements during the protracted liberation struggle (self-reliant, disciplined, cohesive and with a strong ideological underpinning) and the conventional post-statehood narrative (a warmongering rogue state, a major violator of basic human rights and the source of an endless exodus of

U. C. Dirar (✉)
University of Macerata, Macerata, Italy
e-mail: uoldelul@unimc.it

youth). This paper aims to discuss some of the epistemological and methodological issues underpinning these conflicting accounts of Eritrea's path to statehood. Drawing on colonial literature and documents produced by Eritrean nationalist forces, I will assess the extent to which the manipulation of historical sources and the successful hegemonic production of narratives by the victorious Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) shaped the discourse on Eritrea during the years of the liberation struggle. A mix of colonial narratives and radical leftist ideologies has conjured up an image of Eritrean nationalism and statehood that has escaped rigorous epistemological scrutiny. In my paper, I argue that Eritrean nationalist leaderships have successfully projected an image of their struggle that aimed to meet Western expectations and stereotypes of the progressive and "civilised" organisation, while pursuing a brutal and ruthlessly authoritarian policy on the ground. Beyond the specific case of Eritrea, I strongly believe that this analysis can provide crucial insights for a better assessment of the many contradictions that the contemporary African state faces in its complex relations with both its citizens and the international community.

A valuable source of inspiration for this paper was the pioneering work of Irma Taddia, especially her two articles *At the Origin of the State/Nation Dilemma: Ethiopia, Eritrea, Ogaden 1941* (Taddia, 1990) and *Riflessioni sulla formazione dello Stato in Eritrea* (Taddia, 1993), published at a crucial historical juncture: the fall of the Marxist-Leninist regime in Ethiopia, the achievement of independence by Eritrea and the implosion of the Somali state. Taddia's paper captured this extraordinary historical conjuncture and suggested possible epistemological frameworks for understanding it in a historical perspective. Her main contribution to the debate on the historical understanding of the formation of the Eritrean state was to situate the discussion on state formation in the Horn of Africa within the broader debate on the African state, thus deconstructing the conventional assumption of the exceptionality of the Eritrean case. In doing so, she suggested that the main themes of the debate on colonialism, nationalism and state-building that have shaped African political discourse are also present in the Horn of Africa. According to her, the difference lies not in the issues and questions at stake, but rather in the solutions adopted. Within this perspective, she has also emphasised the need for an analysis of state formation that emphasises a historical perspective that brings a deeper diachronic breath to the debate. Another important contribution of Taddia was her insistence on the need to reframe the discussion of the colonial legacy in the process of state formation. She argued that establishing an overly neat and linear link between the region's postcolonial political crisis and the colonial past would have been misleading and historically unsupported. Rather, she proposed shifting the focus of the discourse to what she defined as "a process of 'unfinished' decolonisation" (Taddia, 1990), in which the transition from colonial to postcolonial arrangements was determined not by a dialectical process where the colonial power and the former colonial subjects were the main actors, but rather by external international actors emerging as conquerors from the rubble of the Second World War and already operating under the early polarising shadows of the Cold War. Having reconfigured the epistemological framework, Taddia, drawing on Lonsdale's (1981) analysis of the Kenyan case, then moved on to the question of state formation, arguing for the need to bring to the fore the issue of

class differentiation within colonial society. In this regard, she highlighted what she described as the African paradox, where “class structure is caused by political differentiation during colonialism and reinforced [sic] nationalism against colonialism itself” (Taddia, 1990). Finally, the last part of Taddia’s rich contribution to the debate was her insightful analysis of the complex intertwining between early Eritrean nationalism and certain circles of Italian colonists, which amounted to an almost incestuous relationship. Indeed, she pointed out that, in a curious twist of history, early Eritrean nationalist claims found a receptive audience among some sections of the Italian settler community, who saw the independence option as their last chance to remain in Eritrea after the UN decision dashed the last hopes of the former colony’s return under Italian rule (Negash, 2004).

Building on this rich and still under-explored epistemological framework, this paper aims to broaden its boundaries by analysing the epistemological sustainability of the notion of the state itself in the colonial system. In my discussion, I will also try to assess which aspects of pre-colonial notions of territory and sovereignty as well as of the colonial notion of the state migrated into the nationalist debate and how they were then framed within the conflicting narratives of the Eritrean liberation struggle.

The Westphalian Hubris: The Western Roots of the Contemporary Notion of State

A serious discussion of the contemporary African state cannot ignore its Westphalian roots. Indeed, the asymmetrical relationship that developed between Africa and Europe during the colonial period is also reflected in the pervasiveness of Western political thought, which elevated its peripheral experience to the pretence of universality (Cooper, 2000; Mutua, 1995). Thus, the particular local experience that emerged from the protracted Westphalian process was also projected onto parts of the world that were alien to this process. In an unprecedented example of political hubris, the Western understanding of politics and its territorial organisation overshadowed other equally relevant notions that could not be accommodated within the hegemonic narrative of the West’s triumphant progress, rooted in its supposed superiority. One might argue that a significant accomplishment of Western colonialism has been the hegemonic ascendancy of its political model into the epistemological realm, where it has assumed the exclusive prerogative of defining norms. Consequently, the world is still living in a highly dysfunctional Hegelian bubble, characterised by the rise of the Western concept of the state to a claimed universality that has necessarily relegated all other models to inadequacy and backwardness (Cooper, 2000).

The Westphalian state is founded upon three fundamental pillars: territory, population and sovereignty (Banai et al., 2014; Caporaso, 2000; Osiander, 2001). Territory is a fundamental prerequisite for the very notion of statehood, as the state’s rule is exercised over a spatial realm. This has been a significant aspect of the European experience, with boundaries becoming increasingly distinct and clearly defined. The

modern state has progressively asserted its political unity and administrative coherence in contrast to the blurred combination of particularism and universalism that characterised mediaeval polities. In this new approach, the demarcation and delimitation of the state's borders have increasingly taken on deep symbolic significance, helping to project the power of the state through the deployment of a complex array of highly symbolic paraphernalia such as maps, national flags, passports, national anthems, border and sometimes even fences or walls (Elgenius, 2018).

A second prerequisite for statehood is population, since the state exercises its rule over communities that fall within its jurisdiction, usually defined on a territorial basis. The distinction between state institutions and its population, a key feature of the modern state, has profoundly shaped contemporary politics by introducing a sometimes overemphasised division between the state and civil society. One of the most significant aspects of the relationship between the modern state and its population has been the attempt to effectively control people's mobility, based on the assumption that the wealth of the nation was contained within the population.

A third and crucial pillar of the state is sovereignty, which is the political space through which the state exercises control over both territory and population. Sovereignty can be thought of as a two-pronged set of policies and strategies, both outward and inward looking. Externally, sovereignty refers to the state's ability to project and protect its rights and responsibilities in the international community and in the complex interplay of geopolitical games. From a domestic perspective, sovereignty refers to the projection of state power over the population. It involves to a wide range of interventions in the social body, both public and private, such as land ownership, taxation, conscription, the right to mobility, access to services, social behaviour, sexuality and reproductive rights. The extent of these interventions and the mechanisms for checking the encroachment of state power are usually enshrined in constitutional charters which, should, measure the extent of citizens' freedom in relation to the state and assess the accountability of the state to civil society. In the context of colonialism, a subsidiary theme in the structuring of notions of sovereignty was the perspective that some of the colonial territories could be used to absorb the demographic surplus of some European countries. Italian colonialism provides a case in point (Podestà, 2011).

In addition to the three fundamental pillars discussed above, the contemporary state has incorporated a fourth more elusive, nationalism, less tangible than the previous three but capable of exerting a profound influence on global politics. It enables states to claim their supposed homogeneity and indivisibility, based on a reconstruction of the past that emphasises elements of commonality at the expense of diversity. The nation has been presented as an entity that is coterminous with the state, serving as a conduit between civil society and the state. The nation-state model has thus been presented as the archetypal form of human organisation, casually glossing over the fact that most states and societies are in fact multinational. In fact, as observed by Connor (1972), the nation-state model is a relatively minor phenomenon

in a world political system that is predominantly multinational and multiethnic in its composition of states.¹

Despite this apparent contradiction, the nation-state has been at the centre of political debate in the wake of decolonisation. Nation-building has become a mantra for all new state actors, and the idea of the nation has been appropriated by the postcolonial state as a key aspect of its ideology of legitimacy. The new African states emerging from decolonisation have thus increasingly denied political space to their intrinsic diversity, prioritising the unity of the state at the expense of its internal pluralism. In the process of imagining the nation, African elites have often resorted to an alternative and successful palliative: the introduction of Pan-Africanism, which projected the nationalist framework on a continental scale and brought together powerful ideological references such as anti-colonialism, anti-racism and the right to self-determination (Smith, 2020). Consequently, they have contributed from an opposite perspective to the process of inventing Africa, as defined by Mudimbe (1988), which was initiated by colonial and missionary imagination.

***Bula Matari* and Its Aftermath: Colonial State or Colonial Administration?**

In his seminal work, *The African Colonial State in Comparative Perspective*, Crawford Young (1994) made a significant contribution to the field of African studies by focusing on the question of the African state, with particular emphasis on the legacies of the colonial experience on postcolonial arrangements. Young's comprehensive examination of the colonial state indicates that it was fundamentally flawed in its design and could be held accountable for the numerous shortcomings of postcolonial African states. Young posits that the primary defect of the colonial state was its haphazard and predatory nature, which was embedded within a racialised pattern of interaction with its subjects. This, he argues, resulted in a lack of constructive engagement between the state and its civil society. To epitomise the violent and destructive nature of this peculiar form of state, Young coined the successful image of Bula Matari ("the one who crushes stones" in the Kikongo language) from the nickname given by the Bakongo people to the American journalist and explorer Henry Morton Stanley, who, while in the service of King Leopold II of Belgium, impressed them with his stern and merciless determination to transport dismantled steamships across the winding terrain that separates the Congo estuary from the Congo basin. According to Young (1994: 1), Bula Matari, although specifically referring to the case of the Belgian Congo, as a metaphor, "captured well the crushing, relentless force of the emerging colonial state in Africa". Bula Matari would highlight the omnipresence and pervasiveness of the colonial state in Africa and its violent superseding of indigenous institutions and suppression of any local political subjectivity. A

¹ According to Connor (1972) findings, in 1972 only 12 states out of a sample of 132 could fit the model of a homogenous nation-state.

nightmarish hybrid of the Hobbesian state and the Conradian imaginary, Bula Matari would have flattened the social and institutional specificities of African polities and bent them to the exploitative and predatory ambitions of European colonial powers.

The event that provided legal legitimacy to this process was the Berlin Conference of 1884–1885, where colonial powers agreed on key principles around which to frame their imperial strategies and managed to avert the potential for open conflict by establishing as a key condition the mutual notification of the acquisition of new possessions in Africa (Kraven, 2015). The Conference constituted a pivotal moment in the political history of contemporary Africa, as it facilitated the implementation of the colonial partition by projecting the Western framework of the nation-state onto the continent (Inibasa & Mudau, 2023). The nation-state with its paraphernalia (borders, effective administration and sovereignty) was thus evoked to provide legitimacy to colonial ambitions without resorting to war. The symbolism of European statehood was thus translated over African territories without any substantial involvement of local actors and their institutions (Mutua, 1995).

To this regard, the Berlin Conference can be regarded as a paradox and a misunderstanding. The paradox arises from the fact that actually the Conference generated a deep contradiction between its legalistic claims for formal occupation of lands portrayed as *terrae nullius* and the blatant disregard of the principle of people's consent which is at the very base of the contemporary Western notion of nation-state (Mutua, 1995). The misunderstanding arises from the fact that the Westphalian notion of sovereignty was not introduced into Africa as an attribute of these territories; rather it was as a projection of the European state, where both sovereignty and power ultimately resided (Bauder & Mueller, 2023). European authorities thus began conflating colonial possessions with the equations of state power. This is arguably the major epistemological limitation of Bula Matari as a framework for understanding the contemporary African state and its colonial roots. Indeed, Bula Matari did not enjoy the most important attribute of the Western state, namely sovereignty. In this regard, I find more convincing Cahen's suggestion to substitute the notion of colonial state with "imperial administrative apparatus of European states" (2012: 2). As Cohen argues, the colonial entities were more administrative units rather than full-fledged states. The so-called colonial state was an administrative entity with an alien centre of gravity, since its sovereignty resided elsewhere, in the metropolis of the empire. Furthermore, its margin of autonomy in matters of international relations or economic policy was almost nil. Therefore, sovereignty, which Crawford Young (1994: 95) defines as the lynchpin of the European notion of state, is absent from the political landscape of colonial Africa. A second significant limitation of the Bula Matari framework is that it fails to acknowledge the nuances and varieties of colonial administrative models. Concurrently, this framework minimises the role of African agency in navigating the forms of colonial power and locates all political initiative in the supposedly overwhelming power of European actors. This disregards the capacity of colonial subjects to influence the decision-making strategies of the colonial administration and advance their own agendas. Therefore, if the notion of the colonial state is epistemologically void, the most logical conclusion, as Cahen (2012: 2) puts it, is that African states "... which succeeded the European administrative

apparatus chronologically, are new States, not States in which only the leadership has changed”.

Italian Colonialism and the Issue of the State

The Horn of Africa and Eritrea in particular offer a very good example of the complexity of the colonial landscape and show the limitations of the Bula Matari framework. On the eve of Italian colonial rule, the territory corresponding to the present-day State of Eritrea was situated at the intersection of a multitude of regional political tensions which had resulted in a state of chronic political and social instability for the territory and its inhabitants. The primary sources of this instability can be identified in the western and southern regions. To the west in Sudan, the rise of the Mahdiyya, a political movement bound by a project of re-constitution of an Islamic theocracy, has shaken regional politics and challenged existing notions of religious and territorial belonging. The eastern lowlands of Eritrea thus became engulfed in conflicts, with local populations being gathered under the flag of a rejuvenated and radical notion of political Islam. This project was ultimately unsuccessful due to the incompatibility of the Islamic concept of Umma with ethnic identity and other forms of belonging based on territorial identity (Warburg, 1995).

In the south, a crucial regional development was the Ethiopian state-building process, which aimed to create a modern and relatively centralised state. This entailed an expansionist process towards both the southern and northern marches of the Ethiopian Empire. To the north, Emperor Yohannes IV implemented a strategy aimed at diluting regional rivalries and antagonisms through a complex policy of economic and social integration. This sought to blend differences through marriage and military occupation. As argued by Taddia (2004), the marriage policy sought to circumvent the obstacles that customary law posed to foreign claims to land. The area was under the control of Ras Alula, who sought to strengthen the imperial ambitions of Yohannes IV against analogous and conflicting ambitions, initially from the Egyptian and subsequently from the Italian side. In a similar manner, to the south, a policy of expansionism was pursued in a systematic manner during the rule of Emperor Menelik. From 1865 to 1898, the Emperor expanded his territory, first as King of Shewa and subsequently as Emperor of Ethiopia through the subjugation of Gurage in 1875, Kaffa et al. in 1881, Arisi in 1886, Wollega in 1886, Harar in 1887, Kullo and Konta in 1889, southern Ogaden et al. in 1891, Kambatta in 1893 and finally Walayta in 1895.

In order to consolidate their colonial rule in the region, Italian authorities attempted to exploit the fragmentation and volatility of the political landscape. Their strategy was twofold: on the one hand, they employed the evergreen principle of *divide et impera*, with a fairly successful policy of social and political engineering revolving around ethnicity, religion and social stratification. Concurrently, Italian colonial authorities sought to foster a distinct identity among the indigenous populations within the colonial territory. This was achieved by emphasising the purported role

of colonialism in influencing divergent trajectories shaped by Western notions of modernity, development, and ultimately, civilisation.

For the organisation of Eritrea, the Italian administration adopted a model which saw as the supreme authority the Governor, who presided over a territory divided into *Commissariati regionali* (Regional Commissariats), *Residenze* (Residencies) and *Vice-residenze* (Vice-Residencies) and was accountable directly to the ministry of Foreign Affairs and later to the Ministry of colonies (Romandini, 1985). The *Commissariato* constituted the largest administrative unit within the colony. Its responsibilities included the provision of all administrative services, the management of relations with indigenous authorities, the handling of problems related to the territory and the population and the annual collection of taxes. The *Residenza* and *Vice-Residenza* were subordinate administrative units established in border regions with the primary objective of monitoring relations with the authorities and populations on the other side of the border. Their main purpose was to gather intelligence and conduct surveillance.²

From an administrative point of view, two aspects of the Italian colonial administration stand out. The first was the legal and administrative subordination of the Eritrean territory to the Italian state. Scholars and administrators made it clear that the newborn colony did not enjoy any of the attributes of the state, such as sovereignty, financial independence and autonomy in international relations (D'Amelio, 1911: 87). As Santi Romano (1918: 29), the deity of Italian jurisprudence in those years, clearly stated, "the colony is a possession of the mother country, not an independent state".³ However, being a possession of the state did not entail any complete administrative and legal equivalence between the colonies and the metropolitan state. Consequently, notions of subalternity and difference were consistently reiterated in terms of both territory and population within a legal framework which referred to the state of exception. With regard to the population, the distinction between citizens and subjects was made explicit, with degrees of differentiation that the colonial legislation continually refined and updated over time. In essence, it can be posited that citizens were considered to be Italian nationals and those who could be considered legally equivalent to them, namely other European residents of the colony. Citizens were afforded the principal legal protections set forth in Italian law. Conversely, subjects were the Eritreans and all other African people. In the words of Romano (1918: 125), they were "not constituent elements of the state, but of the colony [without] full political rights, as far as public life in the metropolis is concerned".⁴ However, the state of exception that informed the colonial territory also curtailed the rights of Italian citizens, as they were unable to enjoy the full range of rights enshrined in the constitution. These included the right to passive and active electorate (D'Amelio, 1911: 80; Romano, 1918: 127; Rosoni, 2012). From the standpoint of territoriality,

² The size and number of these administrative units changed through time according to the changing perspectives and priorities of the colonial administrators.

³ Translation mine.

⁴ Translation mine.

the exceptionality of the colonial system was reflected in the administrative structure adopted for colonial Eritrea. In fact, in the Italian administrative tradition, the institution of the *Commissariato* referred to an exceptional expression of power by the central government, which intervened with a substitutive function in contexts where the effective functioning of administrative structures was jeopardised either by security threats or by economic unsustainability. The position of *Commissario* also had specific military roots, which underline its exceptional nature.⁵ However, in the metropolitan territory, the exceptional nature of this institution was made clear as it was framed in terms of a temporary intervention aimed at restoring the full functioning of state administration. In contrast, in the colony, the exceptional administration remained in place throughout the colonial period, with only minor adjustments.

The colonial apparatus was characterised by a rather ramified structure, with the Italians occupying positions at the upper and middle levels (Dore, 2017; Giorgi, 2012). Conversely, Eritreans were employed in lower-level roles, including that of usher, interpreter, translator, secretary and telephone operator. An exception was made by the foreign outposts of the Italian administration, such as the consulate in Sana'a and the offices of the colonial administration in Somalia. In these locations, Eritreans were recruited in sensitive positions due to their linguistic skills and military experience, which the Italians regarded as valuable assets, as they were not at risk of being enticed by agents of the Ethiopian government, as it could have happened in Asmara (Chelati Dirar, 2011; Volterra, 2005).⁶ However, the fact that Eritreans were largely confined to the lower echelons of the administration does not justify overlooking their role and the manner in which they exercised agency. At least two empirical observations provide support for this view. A close examination of *Chi è dell'Eritrea*, a sort of *Who is who of Eritrea* published by Giuseppe Puglisi in 1952, reveals a considerable number of prominent Eritreans who were involved with the Italian colonial administration (Miran, 2018; Puglisi, 1952). A second empirical observation can be made by examining the documents produced by the British Military Administration and in the early years of federation between Eritrea and Ethiopia. Such documentation is primarily located in Eritrean archives, including the Research and Documentation Centre of Eritrea (RDC) and the Archives of the Asmara Municipality (Locatelli, 2004). The refined linguistic register, the exemplary command of Italian, Tigrinya and English, and the remarkable formal and protocol precision of these documents show familiarity with the craft and a high level of professionalism achieved by Eritrean officials. This reflects a protracted exposure to this activity and cannot be summarily explained as the result of the few years of practice that followed the end of the Italian colonial rule.

⁵ It is enlightening that in the nineteenth century the most famous case of resort to the institution of *Commissariato* was in Sicily in 1896, established to solve the growing socio-economic tensions which were perturbing the island (La Lumia 2017).

⁶ Besides Eritrean civil servants, it is also important to highlight the role of traditional authorities in the colonial system and their relevance to the effective functioning of the administration discussed extensively by Dore (2021).

Nationalism in Eritrea and the Issue of the State

In contrast to the conventional understanding of decolonisation as a political process, the Horn experienced the abrupt dissolution of its colonial rulers as a consequence of external developments, namely the military defeat of the Italians by the Allied forces. This resulted in a political entropy that had to be rapidly filled by local ingenuity, forcing Eritrean elites to imagine possible postcolonial arrangements in a contradictory process influenced by a combination of internal and external factors, namely Ethiopian hegemonic ambitions and the heavy clouds of the Cold War (Calchi, 1994; Mazov, 2003). Eritrean nationalists had two distinct visions of the future nation. One perspective was to view Eritrea as an integral part of the Ethiopian empire, in alignment with the broader pan-Ethiopian perspective. The alternative was to envisage Eritrea as an independent state (Tesfai, 2007). In this instance, the primary argument put forth was the supposed relevance of colonial modernisation. In other words, colonialism was identified as a key factor in the separation of Eritrean communities from their neighbours, with modernisation processes being identified as a significant factor in this process.

These developments point to striking contradiction in the trajectory of regional politics. While Italian colonialism played an important role in shaping some of the local elites and in triggering socio-economic developments that challenged previous arrangements, the major political processes that unfolded in the region after the end of colonial rule revolved around an axis of tension in which the main actor was the Ethiopian state, a polity that while surviving the challenges of Western colonialism had actually expanded its territorial control during the years of the colonial scramble for Africa. Borrowing from Clapham's (2017: 3) penetrating analysis, "reduced to brutal simplification, the Horn may be described as constituting non-colonial Africa, as contrasted with the states of the rest of the continent south of the Sahara that may be conceived essentially, despite the enormous differences between them, as the successors to European colonialism". Consequently, nationalist strategies implemented in the Horn were not directed against oppressive Western policies, but rather against an African state, Ethiopia, which was perceived by nationalist elites as oppressive and a threat to their political agendas. It can be argued, therefore, that the politics of the region in the period following the end of colonial rule developed more along cleavages rooted in pre-colonial rather than in colonial dynamics.

The debate on the state within Eritrean nationalism should be understood against this relatively unique background and can be analysed in three main stages of development. The first can be located in the aftermath of the defeat of the Italians by the Allied forces and the establishment of the British Military Administration until the first steps of the Federation between Eritrea and Ethiopia (1941–1957). During these hectic years, Eritrean elites engaged in a fierce struggle for the state, in which both the definition of the state and access to it were at stake. For those who framed their nationalist perspective within the pan-Ethiopian framework, the obvious reference was the imperial Ethiopian state, with its narrative rooted in an understanding of regional politics in terms of an alleged millenarian continuity, only ephemerally interrupted

by the Italian parenthesis. For them, access to the state meant joining the dynamic and relatively efficient Ethiopian civil service, which would appreciate the added value of their education and professional experience acquired under the colonial administration. They thus joined a long tradition that had illustrious epigones in personalities such as Blatta Gebre Egziabeher Gilay,⁷ Tesfamikael Teku'e, Medhane Gebre, Mangasha Berru, Fitawrari Zakaryas Tekle, Qanazmac Solomon Wolde Kidane, Lorenzo Tazaz, Ephrem Teweldemedhin.⁸ Conversely, for those who envisioned Eritrea as an independent state, it was imperative to define their own notion of the state and then demonstrate its sustainability and identify modalities of access. For this first group, the challenges were steep. First, they had to define their concept of the state and then give it legitimacy. Squeezed between ethnicity (Tsfai, 2007) and religion (Makki, 2011; Venosa, 2013), they initially had a shaky and uncertain political trajectory which led them, at times, to collude with the neo-colonial projects of Italian settlers—supported by the Italian government—who saw an independent Eritrea,⁹ politically close to Italy, as the only chance for their survival as a social entity (Morone, 2016; Negash, 2004).¹⁰ Part of this generation seems to have embraced an idea of the state and the nation that was epistemologically informed by the debate within the Italian Risorgimento and the broader debate on liberal democracies (Woldemariam, 1995).¹¹ The sustainability of the prospective state and access to it were inextricably linked. The former was predicated on exposure to Italian, supposedly more modern, administrative procedures, which in turn paved the way for their privileged access to the state. In this debate, modernity should be understood as both a discursive project and an economic structure that produces new socio-economic patterns of relations and production. However, Eritrea, like other African states emerging from decolonisation, had a relatively weak economic system, which led its nationalist elites to subsume both the discursive and structural components of modernity, thus embodying what John Kautsky (1967) described as colonial intellectuals taking on a historical mission whose aim was modernisation and whose expression was nationalism. Like many other nationalist and anti-colonial movements, the Eritreans have accepted the dichotomy between tradition and modernity created by the structure of power they sought to critique. What makes the Eritrean case particularly interesting, however, is the deployment of a complex discursive arsenal against an African polity that is simultaneously accused of being colonial

⁷ To the discovery of this fascinating character has been crucial the work of Irma Taddia (1994).

⁸ Detailed references and short biographic notes in Gebre Selassie (2015).

⁹ In this respect, a document written by Giuseppe Puglisi in November 1952, which describes the complex debate within the Italo-Eritrean community on the question of Eritrea's destiny, is very revealing. See Giuseppe Puglisi, *Ai membri dell'Associazione Italo-Eritrei* Asmara, Research and Documentation Centre of Eritrea (hereinafter RDC) HIS Brit 3 - 01675.

¹⁰ In order to better appreciate the political complexity of the interplay between internal and external factors, it is important to remember that during these years Italy was not yet a member of the UN, so its room for manoeuvre and lobbying for its African interests was significantly reduced and subject to the weight of US and USSR decision-making (Calchi, 1994).

¹¹ Evidences of this debate can be found in an interesting document by Mohamed Omar Kadi, *La politica e il destino*, RDC His Fed 1.

and primitive, while implicitly celebrating Italian colonialism as the foundation of Eritrean claims to statehood and nationhood.

A second, more assertive approach to the issue of statehood emerged in the late 1950s as a result of Eritrean nationalist disillusionment with the federal arrangement, which they perceived as being undermined by the Ethiopian government. The failure of diplomatic solutions, including appeals to the UN, paved the way for a more radical approach that promised to raise the level of conflict from a largely non-violent approach to open struggle for the conquest of the state and the liberation of the nation. The first proponents of this approach were the members of the Eritrean Liberation Movement (ELM), young Eritrean nationalists inspired by the dominant nationalist strategies of the time and drawing on their previous militancy within the Sudanese Communist Party. They promoted the idea of seizing the state through a coup d'état, as had happened in Egypt, Siria and Iraq (Makki, 2002: 201; Markakis, 1987: 111; Iyob, 1995: 109–110).

The harshness of Ethiopian repression further intensified the political struggle and the nationalist project moved from the theory of the coup d'état to armed struggle, a project initially explored by the ELM and later taken up in a more structured and effective form by the new nationalist force, the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF). Heavily influenced by the anti-colonial liberation struggle waged by the Algerian National Liberation Front, the ELF steered Eritrean nationalism into a new and radically different practice of struggle that required new epistemologies and forms of organisation (Weldeghiorghis, 2014). The new approach involved a shift from the traditional understanding of politics as the exclusive domain of a select few to a more inclusive perspective that embraced the active participation of the population as both political and military actors. In terms of epistemology, the most significant change was the shift in political focus from the question of the state to the question of the nation (Bereketeab, 2017). The struggle for the state receded into the background, to be replaced by a growing emphasis on the nation to be created and its elements of identity. This new approach reflected the ongoing debate on pan-Arabism and Arab nationalism, which strongly influenced the early phase of the ELF. The transnational nature of these ideologies led to the prioritisation of issues of identity and notions of belonging, with diminished attention to the state, at times even questioning the consistency of Arab nationalism with notions of state sovereignty (Barnett, 1995).

The third phase of the Eritrean approach to the state commenced in the late 1960s and continued until the end of the liberation struggle in 1991. This phase saw the emergence of a more radical approach that portrayed both the state and the nation as works in progress, shaped by the harshness and steadfastness of the armed struggle. For the new generation of nationalists, the transformative role of the struggle also became an inherent source of legitimacy for nationalist claims (Makki, 2002). This new approach was grounded in socialist and revolutionary epistemologies and reflected the tensions and political orientations of the era. In line with similar developments in other African and Asian countries, socialism provided the new generation of Eritrean nationalists with a powerful framework to understand the complexities of their societies and the technologies of rule that enabled them to address the complex political landscape they were facing (Markakis et al., 2021;

Verhoeven, 2021). The growth of this new trend within the ELF must be understood in the context of broader and multifaceted developments. Crucial was the experience of selected young ELF fighters sent to Syria, China and Cuba for political and military training between 1963 and 1967. The political capital bought back home by these fighters included the Ba'athist experience in Syria, the Cultural Revolution in China and revolutionary socialism in Cuba (Iyob, 1995; Markakis, 1987).

A second important factor was the influx into the ELF of a new wave of militants from the urban youth, many of whom had previously been involved in the growing radical movement at Haile Selassie I University in Addis Ababa. The main contribution of this group was the dissemination of the tenets of Marxism and Marxism-Leninism that provided a new ideological foundation to Eritrean nationalist discourse and thus the integration of nationalist claims with instances of social justice and revolutionary transformation of the society. Eritrean radical nationalists were very active in the Ethiopian student movement both in Ethiopia and abroad (Connell, 2005; Tadesse, 1998; Zewde, 2010) taking part to the heated debate that was flaring up on issues of nationalism and social justice. Eventually, the main outcome of these intertwined experiences was the radicalisation of Eritrean nationalism and the emergence of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) as a splinter group from the ELF that would take over and lead Eritrea to independence from Ethiopia.

Narratives on the State During the Armed Struggle

Within these new and more radical epistemologies, notions of the state in Eritrean nationalist narratives rested on two main pillars. On the one hand, both the ELF and the EPLF attributed increased relevance to the Italian colonial legacy as a material and conceptual source of Eritrean claims to independence and statehood. In a more structured and intensive way, the new political elite identified colonialism as a source of legitimacy for the future state, emphasising its transformative role in radically changing the socio-economic relations of Eritrean society from a semi-feudal economy to a market economy and ultimately to capitalist modernity. However, the anchoring of independence claims in the supposedly transformative role of colonialism contained intriguing elements of contradiction. First, it brought to the fore notions of modernity and civilisation that were borrowed in a largely unfiltered way from the colonial narratives used to legitimise the so-called civilising mission. The new revolutionary narratives, apart from the dialectical paraphernalia of the Marxist matrix, seemed to echo with startling similarity some fundamental aspects of the colonial representation of African societies, read according to a dichotomous scheme that pitted Western modernity against African tradition (Cooper, 2000). Another consequence of this approach was that it promoted narratives of alleged Eritrean exceptionalism, portraying the Eritrean people as industrious, clean, dignified, civilised (in other words, more civilised than their neighbours)—again, a notion whose genealogy could easily be traced back to colonial narratives (Chelati Dirar, 2013; Gini, 1912). The second epistemological pillar of revolutionary discourses on nation and state

was Marxism-Leninism. The adoption of this ideology implied the need to read political processes through the lens of class struggle, and in the apparent absence of a strong urban proletariat, the only alternative left was to impose class struggle on the peasantry along the lines of what had been theorised and practised by the Maoist revolution in China. Thus, the liberation struggle was now framed as a people's struggle with new and more ambitious transformative ambitions. In this mutated perspective, both ELF and EPLF claimed for themselves the role of a guiding and inspiring leadership that would liberate the nation described as oppressed for centuries and lead independent Eritrea into a progressive, peaceful and just future. This future was projected as a socialist one in which the Front would build a modern state in which reactionary (the temptation is to read it as synonymous with traditional) aspects of the past would be erased and the people would eventually be free (ELF, 1975; EPLF, 1977). Therefore, the liberation struggle was transformed into a social and political laboratory where to mould both the nation and the state. The nation, in spite of the apparent diversity of its components, was depicted as forged by the common experience of the struggle where all localisms (ethnic, religious or regional) were expected to gradually recede hammered out by a new and stronger bond derived from this intense and unique experience (Müller, 2011). Similarly, the liberation struggle was perceived as a political laboratory where administrative and organisational practices of the future state were to be experimented. In line with this orientation, both the ELF and the EPLF devoted a great deal of attention to organising the administration of the territory under their control establishing various departments which potential equivalents of future ministries (Hjalmarsson, 2020). The two fronts also tried to project their sovereignty on their citizens at home and in the diaspora through a number of mass organisations established, with members categorised according to their occupational or social status, including workers, students, peasants and women. In this process, there seems to have been very little effort to analyse in depth the nature and scope of the future state and even less effort to provide it with indigenous epistemological foundations, drawing on the wealth of indigenous political traditions. Indeed, the notion of the state envisaged by these organisations seems to be imbued with a patronising progressivism that leaves little room for "traditional" epistemologies. Conversely, the modernist narratives of both fronts repeatedly target traditional societies as reactionary and do not seem to truly appreciate the diversity of Eritrean societies when they insist on the need to sedentarise nomadic societies as a way of modernising them (ELF, 1975; EPLF, 1977).

Within the EPLF, discourses on the state seem to have been deliberately vague because of both tactical strategic priorities. From a tactical point of view, discourses on the state addressed to international audiences seem to have been framed primarily to win the souls of international supporters by offering an image of a progressive, egalitarian and just organisation that met the naïve expectations of international (especially Western) leftist audiences (Smith-Simonsen, 2003). Crucial to this mimetic tactic was the contribution of the Eritrean diaspora, deeply rooted in the political life of their host countries. On the ground, however, a more complex strategic approach to the notion of territory, borders and sovereignty was being developed. On the one hand, the public image of a popular struggle based on inclusive and democratically

participatory practices was contradicted by a massive securitisation of political life, reflected in the ruthless repression of dissent (labelled as a threat to national cohesion) and the secretive nature of the decision-making process (Connell, 2005). On the question of territorial sovereignty, the EPLF seems to have developed a dangerous attitude of superficial camaraderie, not treating the question of the borders of the future state as a current priority suggesting that it would have been settled amicably with the other comrades in struggle, namely the Tigray People's Liberation Front (Tronvoll, 1999). At the same time, the EPLF leadership seems to have harboured a strong (and at times naïve) belief that the colonial borders would have been a clear and indisputable point of reference in future negotiations unveiling a superficial familiarity with colonial policies and legislation in Eritrea.

Statehood Between Tradition and Modernity: The State of Eritrea

Despite having started well in advance of other African independence processes, the claims of the Eritrean nationalists were crowned with success only in May 1991 with the achievement of independence (ratified by a UN supervised referendum in April 1993) after thirty long and painful years of struggle. Eritrea's independence had nurtured high expectations of peaceful developments and regional cooperation.¹² These expectations have been further encouraged by the programmatic statements of the EPLF leadership which prospected the future of Eritrea as a thriving regional hub, a sort of African Singapore (Tsegai, 1991). This particular interest in Singapore, which is often addressed in disparaging terms by scholars (Abbay, 2017) and pamphleteers, deserves a more analytical scrutiny, otherwise one runs the risk of perpetuating a Eurocentric and patronising perspective that always tends to trivialise African political experiences as approximate and inadequate, on the assumption that only European experiences are methodologically and project-wise accomplished.¹³ On the contrary, it is always necessary to take the perspectives and political agendas of African actors seriously, in order to understand their planning complexities and long-term implications. Indeed, Eritrea's interest in Singapore led to the immediate establishment of diplomatic relations in 1993 followed by a visit by the President of the State of Eritrea in 1997.¹⁴ It also involved various Ministries in the careful study of Singapore's experience (Welde, 2014). This fascination with Asian models was not unique to Eritrea, as in the same years, both post-Derg Ethiopia and post-genocide

¹² This enthusiasm and hope is caught in many of the publications appeared in those years, see for instance Henze (1991); Dornboos et al. (1992); Cliffe et al. (1992); Gebre (1993); Amare (1994).

¹³ Zekre Lebbona "Eritrea: the Dimming Memory of Singapore", Asmarino.com, <https://www.asmarino.com/articles/4429-eritrea-the-dimming-memory-of-singapore> (last accessed on 2 May 2024).

¹⁴ Reports of this visit are available on the website of Singapore's National Archive, <https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/photographs/record-details/1d5de259-1162-11e3-83d5-0050568939ad> (last accessed on 3 June 2024).

Rwanda (Goodfellow, 2014) were similarly interested in Singapore and other East Asian economic powerhouses such as South Korea and China itself (Verhoeven, 2021). As far as the Horn of Africa is concerned, this fascination with Asia needs to be analysed in a broader historical perspective that has its roots in the experience of the so-called Japanisers in the 1920s, when the Ethiopian nationalist intelligentsia looked to Japan as a source of inspiration (Zewde, 2002). For this generation, Japan embodied a successful example of modernisation and growth without subalternity to the West. Similarly, but in a radically changed political landscape, the revolutionary leadership in Africa and the Horn looked to China during the vibrant years of decolonisation and later to the emerging Asian Tigers, as an approach to development alternative to that dictated by the West (Fourie, 2017; Taylor, 2007).¹⁵

In retrospect, however, unlike Ethiopia and Rwanda, which delivered economic growth without democracy (Hagmann & Reyntjens, 2016), the trajectory of the EPLF and its subsequent political offshoot, the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ), founded in 1994 (Markakis, 1995), diverged significantly from the aspirations of rapid development and modernisation espoused by the Singapore romance, retaining only its authoritarian features, in a significantly enhanced form to the extent that Eritrea is one of the few countries ruled without a constitution (Markakis et al., 2021). While failing to achieve significant socio-economic transformation, the Eritrean developmental state has embarked on a socially destructive trajectory that entails claiming the right and duty not only to identify and pursue economic and social strategies, but also to define and structure the lives of its citizens in every detail (Clapham, 2017; Kibreab, 2017; Tronvoll & Mekonnen, 2014) in an approach which has led some scholars to analyse it from a biopolitics perspective (O'Kane & Redeker Hepner, 2009). With regard to the issue of statehood, this understanding of the developmental state translated into a dramatic expansion of the administrative and socio-economic practices of the guerrilla movement (Makki, 1996). In fact, administratively, the EPLF inherited no bureaucracy or set of state institutions and also had to deal with a dramatic shortage of civil servants, as many of those who had staffed the Ethiopian administration had either fled or been summarily expelled back to Ethiopia. To solve this crisis, the EPLF leadership took a bold step that foreshadowed some of its future authoritarian developments. Instead of demobilising the army, as expected by the EPLF fighters and advocated by the international community (Bruchhaus & Mehreteab, 2000), the Eritrean government saw the need to transform the mobilisation of former fighters into a permanent force. Thus, the EPLF, with its human resources and command structure, was simply translated into the Eritrean state, without indulging in any of the shibboleths of Western liberalism (Jones et al., 2013). Later, in 1993, it was further decided to mobilise the civilian population through compulsory military service of six months, followed by one year of civil service. After the outbreak of the 1998–2000 war with Ethiopia, through the

¹⁵ We should not overlook also the continuity of China as political and organisational models for contemporary African leaders as discussed in Sun Yun (2016), "Political Party Training: China's Ideological Push in Africa?" Brookings Institution, 5 July 2016, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/africa-in-focus/2016/07/05/political-party-training-chinas-ideological-push-in-africa/> (last accessed 3 June 2024).

so-called Warsay Yeka'alo campaign (Bereketeab, 2021; Müller, 2014), the one-year civil service was transformed into a permanent mobilisation of the conscripts, who were thus transformed into a constantly available unpaid labour force to be used in development projects (Kibreab, 2013).

With this unusual set of choices, independent Eritrea developed a hybrid approach to statehood, resulting in a blend of modern statehood and pre-colonial traditions. The fascination with modern statehood is evident in the official name that Eritrea has adopted for itself: "The State of Eritrea". It is worth noting that of the 193 member states of the United Nations, Eritrea is one of the few that officially calls itself "The State of ...". The others are Israel, Kuwait, Libya, Palestine and Qatar. The redundancy of the term, coupled with the composition of this group, speaks volumes about their apparent need to assert their right to statehood, either because of their location in a difficult neighbourhood or because of their fragile international status. In an apparent paradox, however, the Eritrean ruling elite's obsession with statehood also seems to accommodate political practices that challenge contemporary notions of the state and appear to draw heavily on pre-colonial traditions. These include the deliberate indeterminacy of borders,¹⁶ the constant recourse to transnational politics, the informality of political and administrative relations and the deliberate neglect of institution-building policies. On a similar note, land remained, as it had been under Ethiopian rule, the property of the state, but old systems of land tenure that ensured a degree of communal control over land were discarded as outmoded and inimical to the needs of state-led development strategies (Clapham, 2017). Just as in the pre-colonial system, when the military significantly informed the political process and played a major role in defining political control over people and territory (Caulk, 1978), the Eritrean government similarly views the army as a powerful nation-builder, a *de facto* substitute for the state, to the extent that even the PFDJ has now slipped into a cone of shadow, replaced in decision-making by the reclusive President and a small cohort of senior army officers. As Christopher Clapham has pointed out, borders in the Horn of Africa often take on conflicting meanings, with some states asserting their very statehood by strengthening their borders and others systematically renegotiating them or attempting to dismantle existing ones (Clapham, 1996), as the case of Eritrea seems to suggest. This multifaceted approach to borders owes much to the colonial partition of the Horn, but it has also been significantly shaped by the perceptions and practices of the region's political actors. In this regard, the analytical framework provided by Ylönen is useful, inviting us to read regional relations within the Horn and between the Horn, the Arabian Peninsula and even the Persian Gulf in a deeper chronological perspective, stretching in substantial continuity from the pre-colonial to the contemporary political landscape (Ylönen, 2024). According to him, these relations were not diminished by colonialism or the subsequent rise of modern Western notions of state sovereignty.

As a result, the dreams of modernity that envisioned Eritrea as the new Singapore of East Africa, as well as the claims of Eritrean uniqueness, now boil down to a

¹⁶ Aspects of this kind of policies echoes the development analysed by Caulk (1984) in relations to 19th century regional politics.

conventional authoritarian African state where, to quote Mbembe (1988), citizens are forced to seek asylum in all kinds of shelters, including harrowing experiences of migration, to escape what he calls the delinquency of the state, leading to a dangerous decline of civic identity. However, two things make the Eritrean case worse than other African cases: the fact that it has had the opportunity to capitalise on the tragic experiences of other African states that have had access to statehood in the thirty years preceding Eritrean independence, and, the complete absence of sustainable forms of institution-building that has left ordinary citizens completely at the mercy of the whims of those at the top (and sometimes even at the bottom) of the opaque power system (Kibreab, 2017; Tronvoll & Mekonnen, 2014).

Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, it can be argued that the complex and nuanced process of state formation in Eritrea has foisted a number of challenges upon the next generation of leaders and on the Eritrean society as a whole. The most pressing challenge is to rethink the epistemological underpinnings of the future Eritrean state in order to transform it into a people's house, rather than a tentacled Moloch from which citizens are forced to flee by any possible means. However, this challenge cannot be effectively addressed without first addressing four key issues. As a crucial first step, the next Eritrean generation will have to devote all their energies to indigenize the state by retrieving the wealth of local political traditions, often preserved in customary laws and oral traditions. Such an endeavour should not be merely a cosmetic exercise but rather a substantive and epistemologically sound rethinking of the Westphalian roots of the Eritrean state. A second step would be to address effectively the issue of diversity. This should entail discarding the obsolete and condescending rhetoric of Unity in Diversity and instead accommodating the wealth of diversity that shapes the Eritrean cultural landscape in a fully inclusive collective dialogue, through a deep and effective bottom-up process. Against this background, it is of the utmost importance to ensure the inclusion of communities that are usually marginalised within African states (and Eritrea is no exception), which tend to regard them as unruly or less civilised, namely the nomadic and agro-pastoralist populations. A third step that follows from this is the need to rethink the epistemological foundations of the concept of development, in a way that rejects the pervasive arrogance of Western experience in this matter. A new and hitherto little-explored scenario should be imagined drawing from indigenous economic, environmental and social practices. This would entail rejecting the top-down approach based on the arrogant conviction of authorities to know better than their citizens the optimal options for organising and reproducing their material and spiritual lives. Eventually the last but no less important step would be to provide normative and effective tools to guarantee the transparency and autonomy of the public administration as well as the executive and legislative apparatus of the state. This is the only way to prevent the recurrence of a nightmare scenario in which a bunch of individuals conflate themselves with the

state, thereby instilling a permanent sense of insecurity and terror in the citizenry, compelling them to adopt the old African anti-colonial strategy of voting with their feet.

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Imagining the Trajectories of the 2018 Peace Agreement Between Eritrea and Ethiopia



Tekeste Negash

Abstract In this paper, I outline briefly the background to the 1998–2000 war between Eritrea and Ethiopia, the nearly 20-year long state of no war no peace and the dramatic and sudden end to the conflict in July 2018. I then proceed to interpret the treaty of peace of 9 July 2018 and the statements made by the leaders of both countries. Although the border between the two countries has been virtually closed, the impact of the treaty remains to be strong. I conclude the paper by putting forward the thesis that there is now conducive environment for the construction of new relations that satisfy the interests of both countries.

Keywords Eritrean-Ethiopian war · Interdependence · Peace · Colonial boundaries · Tigray

The past can be researched in such a way that some of it can be known. The present can also be explained in a cohesive manner as it is largely an outcome of a logical or accidental (or a combination of both) events that took place in the recent past. More difficult is to say something useful on the future trajectories of even quite well-defined treaties and agreements such as that signed in Asmara, the capital city of Eritrea between Ethiopia and Eritrea on 9 July 2018.¹ Yet, building a sort of framework on the basis of an understanding of the present is so tempting that a series of social science disciplines (economics, political science, and sociology to mention some) are built around it (Gaddis, 2002).

¹ See Appendix of this chapter for the treaty.

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T. Negash (✉)
Dalarna University, Falun, Sweden
e-mail: tekeste.negash@gmail.com

Background to the 1998–2000 War

In May 1991, the Ethiopian regime (known as the Derg) was defeated by a coalition of armed insurgents from Eritrea and Ethiopia. Eritrea declared its independence in April 1993 with the full support of the newly established Ethiopian regime. For a few years (1991–97), it appeared that Ethiopia was ruled by Eritrea represented by the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) and Tigray led by the Tigrean Peoples' Liberation Front (TPLF). But the comradeship between the two did not last long. At the centre of the conflict was the role of Eritrea and Eritreans in the Ethiopian economic sphere. Independent Eritrea was better equipped to play a big share in the Ethiopian economy compared to the newly established autonomous region of Tigray. It has to be recalled that nearly forty per cent of all industrial and manufacturing activities of Ethiopia were located in Eritrea (Negash, 1997: 139). It is true that the wars fought against the Ethiopian regime of the period between 1974 and 1991 had devastated the fragile economies of both regions. However, using their comparative advantage, Eritrean businessmen (supported by their government) quickly captured the emerging markets in Ethiopia. The perception of Eritrea and Eritreans playing a very active role in or even dominating the Ethiopian economy was out in the open in Addis Ababa in the early 1990s (Negash & Tronvoll, 2000).

At the same time, the Ethiopian government led by Meles Zenawi (1991–2012) initiated a series of economic development programmes to strengthen the position of Tigray in the Ethiopian economy. The TPLF-dominated government began to build similar factories (such as for the manufacture of leather goods, drugs, and textiles) as those in Eritrea. The Eritrean government reacted sharply to what it called the duplication of manufacturing companies and the creation of unnecessary competition between Eritrea and Tigray. The TPLF fought to lift Tigray from its position as neglected and poor periphery within Ethiopia. I think we can safely argue that the Eritrean government had either little sympathy for or very little knowledge of the objectives of the TPLF and its long war against the previous Ethiopian regime.

The only way for the TPLF to develop its region was to capture the position of Eritrea as the second manufacturing zone of the country (*ibidem*: 37). The Asmara Pact of 1993, the final objective of which was the economic and eventual political integration of Eritrea and Ethiopia, was frustrated to a large extent by a lack of common purpose as to the way forward. While Eritrea continued to build on its comparative advantage and demanded a free hand in the Ethiopian economy, the TPLF-dominated government in Addis Ababa was devising ways of curtailing Eritrean presence and influence in Ethiopia. By the end of 1997, Ethiopia, feeling strong and secure, introduced a new trade system with Eritrea, which if put into practice would effectively push the latter away from the Ethiopian economy. From 1998 onwards, the Ethiopian government decided that trade between the two countries would be managed by the letter of credit system, with the US dollar as the currency of trade. The refusal of the Ethiopian government to allow the new Eritrean currency parity with the *birr* (Ethiopian currency) was further interpreted as a hostile act.

In early 1998, the Eritrean President Isaias Afewerki gave a long interview where he summed up his views on what went wrong in Eritrean-Ethiopian relations. He stressed that the aim of Ethiopia's new policy was to prevent Eritrea from participating in the Ethiopian economy—for example in the agro-industry, transport, and finance sectors. Isaias Afewerki concluded that the deadlock should not continue indefinitely, that the Eritrean and Ethiopian people are bound to live together and that as he put it “we cannot change geographical and historical links that bind the peoples of the two countries” (Negash & Tronvoll, 2000: 37). Finally, Isaias said that Eritrea, while respecting Ethiopia's policies, would continue to look for better alternatives (*ibidem*). The introduction of a new Eritrean currency and the refusal of the Ethiopian government to accept it on an equal footing with the Ethiopian currency were tantamount to a declaration of war. Isaias Afewerki felt that the TPLF-led Ethiopian government had declared an economic war on Eritrea. The only option for Eritrea (according to Isaias' reading of the political climate of the region and the period) was to force the TPLF-led Ethiopian government to a negotiating table. By occupying Badme, a small border village whose ownership was contested, Eritrea expected that the TPLF-led Ethiopian government would choose to renegotiate its economic policy on Eritrea as the best strategy to deal with its new neighbour. The Eritrean government believed (and continued to believe) that since TPLF had little support among the other Ethiopian ethnic communities, a slight provocation would force it to the negotiating table with EPLF, its former ally. Isaias Afewerki did not imagine that his invasion of the village of Badme would lead to a full-scale war that lasted for two long years.

Both EPLF and TPLF knew what was at stake. The Eritrean government wanted a bigger role (free movement of goods, people and capital) in the Ethiopian economy. Eritrea had made it clear through the years (1991–7); it desired to integrate its economy with that of Ethiopia as had been the case already in the 1950s when the territory of Eritrea was first federated and later incorporated as a province in Imperial Ethiopia. The TPLF-led Ethiopian government reasoned that the region of Tigray—TPLF's stronghold—would lose in the bargain. Tigray and TPLF would not be able to compete with Eritrea with its advanced economic infrastructure and large diaspora population ready to pump in resources for further investment. TPLF did not want to share the Ethiopian market with Eritrea. The readiness with which the TPLF supported the independence of Eritrea in the early 1990s without any consultation with the Ethiopian population, is a good evidence of the policy of trying to push Eritrea out of Ethiopian political and economic affairs.

The 1998–2000 war was concluded with a peace treaty signed in Algiers in 2000 in the presence of the United Nations, the European Union and the USA. The United Nations Peace Keeping Mission moved to Eritrea in 2000 and left it in 2007. The United Nations Cartographic Unit demarcated the border in 2002 but did not delimit it because neither Ethiopia nor Eritrea was interested to walk along the new border and lay down visible markers. Moreover, Ethiopia rejected the verdict of the International Court of Arbitration. The United Nations, however, left behind it a virtually demarcated border. Despite the peace treaty, the Eritrean government stated repeatedly that it would not normalize its relations with Ethiopia as long as TPLF remained the

dominant organization in Ethiopia. The Eritrean government reiterated that it would resume its relations with Ethiopia with great vigour the day the TPLF was either removed from power or defeated. TPLF responded by pursuing a policy of isolating Eritrea in the hope that its economy would implode from inside. The Ethiopian government believed that it was only a question of time. The “no war no peace” phase could only come to an end under two circumstances. The first was the fall of the Eritrean regime led by Isaias, and the second was the fall of the TPLF from its commanding heights in Ethiopian politics.

On 2 April 2018, the TPLF-led government was replaced by that of Dr Abiy Ahmed, the leader of the Oromo Peoples Democratic Organization. The TPLF leadership packed their suitcases and moved back to Mekelle the capital city of the Tigray regional state. Isaias Afewerki felt victorious, and he spent little time to sign a treaty of peace and friendship with Ethiopia. “From now onwards, anyone who says that the Eritreans and Ethiopians are two people has not understood the truth. Eritreans and Ethiopians are one people in two countries”. This is my free translation of the statement in Tigrinya of Isaias Afewerki, President of Eritrea, during his first visit to Ethiopia on 14 July 2018.² The President further stated that he urged Dr Abiy Ahmed, the Prime Minister of Ethiopia, to continue the work of uniting the two countries. Asked about his best achievements in life, President Isaias stated that signing peace with Ethiopia as one of them.³

Can we take the statements of the treaty seriously, coming as they do from a person who fought against Ethiopia for over fifty years, or can we dismiss them as the utterances of a senile leader soon to exit the political scene? As I shall attempt to explain in this paper, I argue that the views of President Isaias on Eritrean-Ethiopian relations need to be taken seriously. I strongly believe he has significant support inside Eritrea; the overwhelming joy that Eritreans showed at Dr. Abiy’s first visit to Asmara in early July 2018 can certainly be read as a positive sign. The warm reception of President Isaias in Ethiopia and the positive treatment of Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia could also be taken as important factors in the construction of peace.⁴ Yet the question remains: How do we read the new phase of Eritrea-Ethiopia relations and what are the prospects for a sustainable peace between the two countries? My view, which is also the main premise of this paper, is the following: There are now sufficient conditions for new Eritrean-Ethiopian relations which reflect the wishes of

² President Isaias talked in Tigrinya while Prime Minister Abiy functioned as his Amharic translator.

³ For a longer discussion on the peace treaty see Negash (2020).

⁴ By the middle of 2018, there were about 150,000 Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia. The Ethiopian government treated Eritrean refugees very well indeed; they were allowed to work anywhere, and up to 3,000 Eritrean refugees were admitted to the various colleges and universities of the country. The more than 50,000 Eritreans who moved to Ethiopia during the first six weeks of the opening of the border (between September and November 2018), which had been closed for nearly twenty years, were accepted as brothers and sisters by the people of Tigray. I was in Mekelle in the beginning of October 2018, and I was able to witness the warm reception the Eritreans were given by the people of Tigray. The armed conflict between the federal government and the region Tigray (started on 3 November was officially ended on 28 November 2020). The involvement of the Eritrean government on the side of Ethiopia has enabled the Eritrean regime to monitor closely the movements of Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia.

the population of both countries and their leaders. The most important condition is, of course, the statement of President Isaias, but how did this condition come about? How do we explain this new narrative? I think it is when we try to grasp the constant and changing features of Eritrean-Ethiopian relations from the late 1950s onwards that we can appreciate the implications of President Isaias's statement.

The 20 Years “No Peace-No War” Phase and Its Impact on Eritrea

It is important to assess the price Eritrea paid in ousting the TPLF from the commanding heights of the Ethiopian state. Such assessment has, I believe, a strong bearing in hypothesizing that Eritrea experienced a humiliating defeat at the 1998–2000 war. The Eritrean government was fully convinced that its armed forces would easily defeat the Ethiopian forces led by the TPLF. The Eritrean government reminded the world that its armed forces defeated not so long ago one of the most sophisticated armies in Africa, namely the Ethiopian army. By the end of May 2000, however, Ethiopian forces had occupied about twenty five per cent of Eritrea and the Eritrean armed forces had no chance of defending the country. If the Ethiopians had ulterior mission other than to push Eritrea away from Badme, a border village that it forcefully occupied, they could have easily marched and taken possession of strategic places such as the port of Assab (Zewde, 2013).

The 1998–2000 war was indeed a war between the same people predominant Orthodox Christians and Tigrinya speakers living on both sides of the border between Eritrea and Ethiopia. The Isaias Afewerki regime was fully dominated by the Tigrinya speakers in Eritrea while Meles Zenawi the leader of the Tigrinya speaking people in north Ethiopia (TPLF) held the reign of power in Ethiopia. Although the humiliating defeat of the Eritrean armed forces in May 2000 put an end to the war and a peace treaty was signed in Algiers in December 2000, none of the parties were willing to settle for a positive peace. The Eritreans did not want to negotiate with the TPLF-led government on the fear that the latter would demand concessions such as access to the sea. And the TPLF-led government was not in hurry as they were busy rebuilding Ethiopia and not least their home region of Tigray. How did Eritrea lose a war against the TPLF? It was after all, the Eritrean Peoples' Liberation Front that created the TPLF! And who is responsible for putting Eritrea and its existence in great danger? These questions were widely debated on the wake of the final war both inside and outside of Eritrea. Many of the former members of the Eritrean army (who were dismissed from their offices by President Isaias Afewerki) put the blame on the shoulders of the President who planned and carried out the war all alone. His former comrades accused him of not applying the principle of collective leadership that they adhered to during the war for liberation of Eritrea. Known as the Group 15, the former leaders and colleagues of Isaias Afewerki demanded that he opens up the political space for them and others to be engaged in dealing with the Ethiopian

threat (Connell, 2005). They also demanded that Isaias take the necessary steps to implement the constitution (approved in 1997). Along the same line but even stronger criticisms were aimed at the Isaias regime by Eritreans in the diaspora.

On 28 August 2000, Yohannes Okbazghi, a reputed historian of modern Eritrean history wrote a reflective article on why Eritrea failed to defeat the Ethiopian army in May 2000.⁵ The ceasefire agreement signed by both parties and where Eritrea accepted the presence of Ethiopian forces deep inside its “sovereign” territory was the point of departure. Okbazghi mentions several reasons for the military and political crisis. The first lesson unlearned was that Eritrean intellectuals in the Diaspora neglected the fact that “progress in independent Eritrea was off its trajectory from the start and that [the intellectuals in the Diaspora] failed to ask important questions. We treated the Eritrean leader as all-knowing because he told us so and we began to do his bidding” (*ibidem*). Okbazghi then details the authoritarian policies of the President of Eritrea in the social, economic and political domains. On early October of 2000, a group of Eritrean (who identified themselves as professionals and academicians) in a letter that came to be known as the *Berlin Manifesto of 2000*, asked President Isaias Afewerki of why and how he failed to control Ethiopian invasion of their country, and put it on the verge of destruction. The authors of the *Berlin Manifesto* answered their own question. Ethiopia won because Eritrea was “ruled by a dictator who has abandoned a rich tradition of collective leadership that was developed during the struggle for liberation”.⁶ Yohannes Okbazghi’s brief but well thought article as well as the *Berlin Manifesto* would certainly have not been written had the outcome of the 1998–2000 war been different.

The second impact of the 20 years “no war no peace” phase was the transformation of Eritrea into a huge military camp. The victorious Eritrean peoples’ Liberation Front had introduced already in 1994 a national service where Eritreans were obliged to do six months military training and twelve months service in the construction of the country. The government argued that the national service would instil among the youth sacrifice and commitment—qualities that the members of the Eritrean Peoples’ Liberation Front showed daily during the 30 years’ war of liberation from foreign domination. There was a wide acceptance of the national service and its duration of 18 months was considered within the bounds of reason. The 1998–2000 war changed radically the balance where every able-bodied citizen was recruited to defend the country. Demobilized soldiers (most of the women) were remobilized again and Eritrea had a standing army of over 300,000 by the end of 1998.

One could argue that the peace treaty between Eritrea and Ethiopia and the decision of the United Nations boundary commission in 2002 would have persuaded the Eritrean regime to initiate a process of demobilization. Eritrea was in fact offered financial assistance mainly from the European Union for this purpose. But what happened was the opposite. In 2002, the Eritrean government introduced a new and more comprehensive programme where every citizen between the ages of 18

⁵ Yohannes Okbazghi, *Lessons still unlearned*, Asmarino.com, 28 August 2000.

⁶ A letter to President Isaias Afewerki from Eritrean professionals and Academics, Berlin, Asmarino.com, 1 October 2000.

and 50 (between 18 and 40 for women) were obliged to do national service. The military training took six months, after which he or she was expected to be involved in all sorts of non-paid national service. The Eritrean government defended this draconian measure on two grounds. The first was the imminent threat of war from the government of Ethiopia, dominated as it was by its arch-enemy the TPLF. The second was the strategic importance of building solid infrastructure as a condition for scaling up Eritrea's economic development (Clapham, 2017).

The 2002 national development programme is still in operation and in theory it affects all those who are 18 and above. The new peace treaty signed with Addis Ababa on July 2018—a peace treaty that was acclaimed as the best achievement of the Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki—has neither led to the dismantlement of the 2002 national service programme nor to the opening of the economy to the private sector.⁷ The 2002 national development programme sealed off the chances of hundreds of thousands of Eritrean young men and women of bright future; they can neither earn money nor build families. It was from this time (from early 2003) that we notice the mass exodus of Eritrean youth—who did not hesitate to risk their lives crossing the Sahara desert and the Mediterranean Sea. The Eritreans who fled the national service hoped to make it to the European side of the Mediterranean Sea, but they would rather die than go back to do more national service. If the Eritrean government was accused of favouring enterprises that it controlled at the expense of the fledgling private sector, the introduction of the national Development Campaign in 2002 (known as the *Warsai-Yikealo Development Campaign*) transformed the Eritrean economy into a war economy. The state assumed the burden and privilege of production and distribution of resources to its citizens. The remittance from Diaspora Eritreans (which makes up to forty per cent of the country's GNP) remains vital; it kept the lives of hundreds of thousands of Eritreans and it concealed the disastrous impact of the unproductive use of the youth doing their national service.

The impact of the 20 years “no war no peace” phase in Eritrean-Ethiopian relations (that is between 2000 and 2018) can be summarized as follows: a painful realization on the part of Eritrea (including its supporters and critics) that Eritrea was defeated by Ethiopia in the 1998–2000 war. Eritrea entered the war fully convinced that it would easily win it because the Ethiopian army led by the TPLF was not as good as the Ethiopian Army that the Eritreans defeated in 1991. The invincibility of the EPLF as one of the mightiest armies in tropical Africa was put to test and failed. The question that Eritrean diaspora intellectuals as well as disgruntled leaders asked was: how could the mighty Eritrean Liberation Army be defeated? The diaspora intellectuals accused the government of Isaias Afewerki for failure of sharing power in the making of the 1998–2000 war and pointed out at him personally for the humiliating defeat. Isaias Afewerki counteracted by arguing that the peace treaty of December 2000 was a prelude to an encompassing war that the TPLF government would sooner or later launch against Eritrea. On the basis of such logic, president Isaias imprisoned all

⁷ President Isaias Afewerki does not understand the basic principles of capital accumulation and economic development. Capital is accumulated when labor and resources are exploited to produce surplus some of which is further invested to produce more capital.

his former colleagues who challenged his authority in September 2001, and early in 2002, he introduced the national development campaign that locked everybody between 18 and 40 to a national service with indefinite duration.

Let me conclude this section by quoting the assessment of two distinguished scholars on what went wrong and of how they can be put right. The first author is Christopher Clapham—an authority on the region since the early 1960s. He wrote a major work that synthesized more than half a century of research on the region (Clapham, 2017: 131). On the 2002 national development campaign, Clapham wrote:

Relaunched in 2002 as the Warsai-Yikaelo Development Campaign, recruits were required to remain in service until the age of forty, or in the case of men until fifty. This in turn provided the government with a large labour force by no means all of which was needed in the army, and many conscripts were therefore allocated to other projects, including not only public works of a developmental kind, but for work on the homes and agricultural estates of senior army officers, and for private companies and notably those owned by the ruling party. Ordinary commercial companies were likewise able to access conscript labour, for whom they paid wages directly to the government, rather than to the individuals themselves. In effect, what has been promoted as a requirement for nation-building and national defence was converted into a system of forced labour, under conditions that met the formal criteria for slavery.⁸

“A state of this kind”, wrote Clapham (2017: 131), “has no objective beyond the survival of its ruler, and any appraisal of post-war Eritrea correspondingly consists in an examination of how this goal has been sought and so far achieved”. Although Clapham is quite severe in his judgement of the Eritrean government, he believed that Eritrea possesses significant strengths. First of all, it has a state that works, albeit in a brutally repressive way, and which is constructed not only on the legacy of the liberation struggle, but on the long-standing tradition of governance, notably in the highlands, that may be expected to endure. An additional source of strength is a continued commitment to Eritrean nationalism, even among those who fled the country as refugees and been subjected to the most harrowing experiences in the process”.⁹

In its preamble, the peace treaty of July 2018 mentions the need to strengthen the links that bind the two countries together. The treaty also mentions the long term objective of integration on all spheres (from economy to security). It is now two years since the signing of the 9 July 2018 treaty. We have a number of studies that attempt to evaluate its chances of success. One of the earliest is Abdu Osman Humadin (2019: 44), who concluded that the Ethiopian Prime Minister marginalized the TPLF from the peace process and thus forced it to become a potential spoiler of the peace treaty that he signed with Isaias Afewerki. Moreover, Abdu Osman Humadin

⁸ Clapham cites Gaim Kibreab’s study (2009), but Gaim does not mention the word slavery in connection to the Eritrean national service. Even the most recent work of Kibreab (2017) does not mention the word slavery (O’Kane and Hepner 2009).

⁹ Here again Clapham uses Gaim Kibreab as his main source on the resilience of Eritrean nationalism. Christopher Clapham (2017: 136) wrote that the members of the Eritrean diaspora possess economic resources, skills and perhaps most important mentalities, which could help shape an Eritrea significantly different, and more beneficial to its people, than the regime that emerged from liberation. The question remains: how good is the assessment of Gaim Kibreab on the subject?

concluded that as the agreement lacks “inclusivity, neutral third party guarantor, and is over ambitious in scope and at the same time lacks clear implementation modalities and timeline, translating the terms of the agreement into durable peace is a complicated process. The International Community ought to press Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and President Isaias Afewerki to honour their pledge and make peace process inclusive and transparent” (*ibidem*).

Another distinguished author who reflected on the 2018 peace agreement is Medhane Tadesse (2020: 246) who concluded as follows:

In the end, the biggest threat to the deal between President Isaias of Eritrea and Prime Minister Abiy of Ethiopia is posed by the nature of deal itself and the process that gave rise to it. [...] However, a new element seems to have entered the country in which those in mainstream politics know no rules and continue to align with a neighbouring power to corner a domestic actor. What is most striking about this development is that these forces claim to be fighting for a united Ethiopia in the face of demands by an empowered enemy country or the concerns of domestic constituencies.

The neighbouring country that Medhane Tadesse refers to is, of course, Eritrea. This logic is correct as long as we discount the role and relevance of irredentist politics in both countries.¹⁰ The logic faces problems if irredentism is given due space. There has always been people from both countries who opposed the continued existence of the colonial border. A fundamental premise of an irredentist position is the refusal to accept or recognize a border that divides the same ethnic and or cultural community into two or several territories. Eritrea and Ethiopia are more than two neighbouring countries. So much has been stated by Eritrea’s President Isaias in July 2018 as well as in February 2020.¹¹

Projecting Eritrean-Ethiopia Relations into the Foreseeable Future

It is highly unlikely that Eritrea would get entangled in another war with Ethiopia. It is also unlikely that Eritrea would initiate a war against Ethiopia. Eritrea is too weak to resort to war as an extension of a political conflict with Ethiopia; it tried it in 1998 and failed. Of equal importance is the realization that the war between Eritrea and Ethiopia had very little to do over disputed borders. On 20 February 2020, President Isaias said on the Eritrean national television that the border was demarcated and delimited long before he was born and that the 1998–2000 war was not between Eritrea and Ethiopia; it was between Eritrea and the TPLF-led government at Addis Ababa. Here the implication is very clear. President Isaias Afewerki would not insist

¹⁰ See Negash (2020), and more specifically on irredentism in Eritrea, see Negash (1994).

¹¹ In an interview with the Eritrean television network (7 February 2020), President Isaias said Eritrea cannot be a neutral observer in what happens in Ethiopia, because what happens in Ethiopia affects Eritrea. He further said that his country cannot work closely with Ethiopia because of the obstructionist stand of the Tigray regional state.

on the implementation of the virtual boundary delimited by the United Nations in 2002. On this issue he is wise, because he knows fully well that such a delimitation of the border where there has not been a conflict would undoubtedly entangle Eritrea and the adjoining region of Tigray.

We can safely hypothesize that as long as President Isaias Afewerki is in power, Eritrea will not raise the boundary issue on the real fear that the delimitation of the boundary could initiate new round of conflict with Ethiopia. This is because swathes of land previously administered by Ethiopia must revert back to Eritrea according to the United Nations boundary map of 2002. These are areas where the Italian colonial administration failed to possess because the people of the district refused to accept the colonial border treaty of 1900 signed between Italy and Ethiopia. Similarly, big chunks of land administered by Eritrea must revert back to Ethiopia. These areas were not disputed areas before 1998. But the relations between the two countries cannot be fully normalized until Eritrea resolves its conflict with Tigray. And this would not occur as long as President Isaias remains as the head of Eritrea. This is because, the conflict between Eritrea and Tigray is based on personal grudges and competition between Isaias and the TPLF party. Isaias has not forgiven the TPLF from pushing him and his country out of Ethiopian economic and political affairs.

What would then be the chances of peaceful coexistence between Eritrea and Tigray after the exit of Isaias from power—most probably by death rather than by internal rebellion against his rule? Given the relations of power between Eritrea and Ethiopia (where Tigray is part), the post Isais government would have the possibility to open a new chapter in its relations with Tigray. The policy of opening Eritrea to Tigray and Ethiopia would not be opposed by the people inside Eritrea, to judge by the reactions of the latter during the opening of the border on 12 September 2018. The Eritrean people along the border demonstrated in action that they did not accept the closure of the border. There is however a possibility that the post-Isaias regime in Eritrea might fail to resolve its conflict with Tigray, if it puts its priorities wrong, by for instance demanding the delimitation of the border between the two countries as worked out by the United Nations Boundary Commission in 2002. This could easily happen if the post-Isaias regime is dominated by Diaspora Eritreans who have paid too much importance to the border issue and pursue a policy contrary to that of Isais Afewerki. By delimiting areas which were not disputed at all, the new boundary line between Eritrea and Tigray produced by the United Nations in 2002 has already created all the conditions for a long-drawn border dispute between Eritrea and Tigray. President Isaias and his advisors have repeatedly stated that there is no undelimited border between Eritrea and Ethiopia (with Tigray as the contiguous region). The wisdom of Eritrean political leaders (after the exit of President Isaias Afewerki) would hinge on whether they are strong enough to come out and declare that the new boundary delimited by the United Nations is not relevant and hence need not be used as basis for negotiation with Tigray.

Conclusion. Colonial Boundaries: To Be or not to Be

The ultimate goal argues Zewde Gabreselassie (2010: 190) is sustainable peace and eventual union of the two countries and asks the question: how would Eritrea abandon its hard-won independence where thousands of people have sacrificed their lives? He answers it: independence that is not accompanied with peace and security is a heavy burden that is passed from one generation to the other and has no meaning. The author argued that it was important that the border between the two countries is delimited as a precondition for building trust. Eritrea ought to cease its hostile activities against Ethiopia (through propaganda and through support of armed groups that fight against Ethiopia). He further suggested that Eritrea would give the Afar region to Ethiopia in this way Ethiopia would have access to the Red Sea. In return, Ethiopia would open its borders to Eritrea, so that goods and people would freely move. This would benefit both countries and the refusal to solve the conflict in this manner would only lead to more war and more poverty (*ibidem*: 187–8).

While the future would tell of how many Eritreans would share this view, Zewde Gabreselassie signals a serious warning about Ethiopia's capacity to meet the challenge. He wrote: "[b]ut for Eritreans to come closer to Ethiopia, the latter has to prove that it is open for all Ethiopians including Eritreans irrespective of ethnic and linguistic differences" (*ibidem*: 188). Zewde expressed his deep concern that the primacy given to ethnic boundaries and the continued politicization of ethnicity was undermining the spirit Pan-Ethiopianism. In 1998, few months before the war, President Isaias said that relations between Eritrea and Ethiopia were proceeding towards integration in all fields. He further said that he left for analysts to call the evolving relations between the two countries in terms of confederation or union. He stressed that relations were developing in a direction where boundaries between the two counties would become meaningless. In July 2018, President Isaias repeated nearly verbatim what he said in 1998. As I mentioned earlier, President Isaias urged the newly elected Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed to go on with the process of uniting the two countries. On 20 February 2020, President Isaias complained that his country could not draw full benefit of the 9 July 2018 agreement because of the obstructions of TPLF as the immediate neighbour of Eritrea. For Isaias, TPLF is a peace spoiler that has somehow to be defeated and made to disappear from the scene. The defeat of the TPLF was according to Isaias a necessary condition for the full implementation of the 2018 agreement. However, since Isaias was not capable of defeating the TPLF or resolving his dispute with the latter, he chose the policy of biding time, while he, no doubt encouraged Abiy Ahmed to bring the TPLF under his control, using force if necessary.

Here it is important to describe briefly the complex relations between Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and the regional state of Tigray as it is of considerable relevance in any discussion about the future relations between Eritrea and Ethiopia. Abiy came to power on 2 April 2018 and he lost no time to distance himself from the record and heritage of the TPLF-led regime. Abiy described the TPLF-led regime of which he was a member for more than 20 years as regime that violated human rights of

its citizens and was engaged in state terrorism. He begged the forgiveness of the Ethiopian people for all the crimes committed by the TPLF-led regime, formally known as the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). It has to be recalled that the TPLF was still a member of the EPRDF coalition party that elected Abiy to be the Prime Minister. However, the more Abiy condemned the past record of the EPRDF regime, the more it became clear that the target was the TPLF. Abiy described the 1991–2018 period as the era of darkness where people were jailed for their opinions and where suspected citizens were subjected to severe torture. Abiy released thousands of political prisoners; he released a documentary (based on those who survived the torture chambers of the EPRDF regime) where all the criminal investigators were Tigrinya speakers or members of the TPLF. The peace treaty with Eritrea demonstrated two aspects of the conflict. The first was that the conflict could have been solved many years ago had it not been for the fact that Ethiopian policy was decided by the TPLF acting for and on behalf of Ethiopia. The second was that the Eritrea-Ethiopia conflict had very little to do with border dispute but rather with the rivalry over resources and opportunities between Eritrea and Tigray. The resources and opportunities were, and are, it has to be remembered, in Ethiopia.

I think one of the reasons for the armed conflict between Tigray region led by the TPLF and the Ethiopian government is the failure of the Abiy government to involve and engage the TPLF in his own government. His policy of sidelining and marginalizing the TPLF was the major reason for the build-up of the conflict. Now the question is why didn't Abiy make the extra effort to work closely with the TPLF? According to the TPLF, there were two reasons. The first is Abiy's failure to reform his party (Oromo People Democratic Organization), as the EPRDF coalition parties had agreed in 2017. The second reason is his ambition to become the supreme leader of the country. There are also other reasons. Dr Abiy had to take into account his constituency, namely the Oromo—the majority of whom felt that their time has finally come. The Oromo extremists pushed forward two visions. The first was that Ethiopia belonged to them since they are about forty per cent of the population while ethnic groups like the Tigreans (comprising about six per cent of the population) would have to accept their minority role. The second vision was an Oromo region freed from non-Oromo dwellers and settlers. Abiy who won the hearts and minds of all Ethiopians (including the majority of the Tigray people) on his pan-Ethiopian credo, now found himself squeezed from two sides, namely those who expected him to push forward with the "Oromization" of Ethiopia and those who relied on his word and waited for him to rebuild Ethiopia for all Ethiopians. In such a tight situation, the TPLF became more of a liability rather than a source of support by reminding him repeatedly to adhere to the principles of governance that they (the EPRDF coalition parties) agreed in 2017.

The final parting of ways between the TPLF and Dr Abiy occurred when the three organizations of the EPRDF resolved to dissolve their organizations and merge into a single pan-Ethiopian political party known as the Prosperity Party which was formed on 1 December 2019. In theory, the Prosperity Party is a single party that is committed to uphold the federal system of the country while at the same time stressing citizenship rights over rights of identity. The TPLF was the only organization that refused to join

the Prosperity Party for several reasons. The conflict and competition between the TPLF and the Ethiopian government led by Dr Abiy continued unabated. By early 2020, the decision of the Ethiopian government to postpone elections (from May to August 2020) was heavily criticized by the TPLF and some Oromo organizations. The first decision to postpone was put forward by the Election Board and the reason was the widespread insecurity in nearly all the regions of the country with the exception of Tigray. The second decision to postpone elections to a future date in 2021 was due to the spread of COVID-19. The TPLF argued that the decision to postpone elections was the desire of the government to prolong its life and not due to COVID-19. And in order to prove its point, the TPLF decided to carry out elections in their home region Tigray on 9 September 2020.

TPLF was advised to delay the elections until the country was fully safe from COVID-19. However, TPLF refused. The Ethiopian government made it clear the regional election was illegal as it was not sanctioned and supervised by the National Election Board. The TPLF argued that as an autonomous region within a federation, it reserved the right to hold elections. Not only did the TPLF go against the advice of the Ethiopian government but it went on and declared that Abiy Ahmed had no legal right to rule over Ethiopia after 10 October 2020 as the final date of his mandate to govern the country.¹² In the regional election conducted in the Tigray regional state, the TPLF won eighty per cent of the votes and thus assured itself that it was the legitimate government of the region and proceeded to declare the Abiy government unlawful. The TPLF refused to send delegates to the Ethiopian House of Parliament on the ground that the current parliament had no legal standing in the country. The TPLF would wait until the outcome of the national elections that Abiy government would conduct. Until such time, the TPLF stood outside of the political discourse while at the same time expecting to get the annual budget allocated to the region.

The Abiy government responded first by declaring the regional election illegal and refused to disburse the budget allocated to the region directly to the central office of the TPLF. This was a direct punishment for TPLF's refusal to recognize the Abiy government and to cooperate with him. It has to be recalled that up to eighty per cent of the budget allocated to the regions comes from the Federal government. The capacity of the regions to collect domestic revenue is quite limited and covers about twenty per cent of the annual budget.¹³ The mistrust that existed between the government of Abiy Ahmed and the TPLF escalated and became so deep that it could only be solved militarily. The TPLF and its extremist supporters (most of them in the Diaspora had been campaigning since the summer of 2018) that Tigray is capable first of defending itself against any attempt by the Federal government; the TPLF, after all, had once defeated tropical Africa's largest and best equipped army. Second, there was a widespread belief that the TPLF in collaboration with

¹² The last election was held on May 2015. The mandate of the government ended at the end of the Ethiopian years that was 30 September 2013 Ethiopian calendar or 10 October 2020.

¹³ The Federal government gets most of its funds (besides internal revenue) in the form of development aid and loans. It is estimated that Ethiopia gets to the tune of 4 billion USD in various forms of loans and aid per year; and it is this fund that is distributed to the regions according to their demographic size.

other anti-Abiy forces such as extremist Oromo groupings could, if the need arises, defeat the government of Abiy on the military ground. Or, the TPLF could opt to declare its own independence and the region has all what is needed for sustainable development. The Ethiopian government begun to make military preparations for an eventual showdown by creating a new armed forces command known as the North West Command. Reading the writing on the wall, the TPLF also begun to finalize its military preparations. It had an estimated army of 37,000 and a militia of more than 150,000. But it did not have heavy weapons.

On the night of the 3 November 2020, the TPLF attacked the camps of the North Command of the Ethiopian Defense Forces stationed on the Eritrean border since 1998. The TPLF was assisted by sympathetic members of the Ethiopian armed forces, most of whom were Tigrinya speakers and most probably secret members of the TPLF. The attack was carried out by night and cut out power and telecommunication services in order to facilitate the operations. The Ethiopian government ordered a punitive action (described as law enforcement measure) on the morning of 4 November 2020. By 5 November, the President of Tigray region, Dr Debretsion said that the Ethiopian command forces had willingly joined the TPLF forces to fight against the unlawful regime in Addis Ababa. The Tigray-Ethiopia conflict escalated further. On 14 November, the TPLF launched a number of missile rockets aimed at Asmara airport. The government of Tigray said openly that Asmara is their prime target because its leader Isaias is behind the Ethiopian attack from the North border. It has to be recalled that many of those soldiers from the North command who fled to Eritrea were fighting against the TPLF from the Eritrean-Tigrean border. The TPLF accused the Eritrean government for actively helping and assisting Ethiopian forces from the Eritrean-Ethiopian border but it could not produce conclusive evidence for its allegation. What was and still is true is the fact that the Isaias regime has not been reconciled with the TPLF and what it did to him and his country since 1998.

The apparently unprovoked missile attack on Asmara, the capital city of Eritrea and TPLF's open statement that it would continue to bomb Asmara created a considerable deal of reactions. The US department came out and strongly condemned (15 November) the attack. The Eritrean government stated that they are not in any way involved in the conflict between Tigray and Ethiopia. The Eritrean president has not given a statement, but sources close to him stated that Eritrea would remain patient out of respect of the Ethiopian people. However, there is a growing evidence that Eritrean forces are deployed not only along the border but deep inside Tigray.¹⁴ The armed conflict between the Tigray regional state and the federal government was officially concluded on 28 November 2020. The TPLF leadership (now referred as the *junta*) left Mekelle and the federal forces entered the city for the first time since 2018. The Ethiopian government declared the demise of the TPLF—a junta that held hostage the people of Tigray for so long.

¹⁴ Alex Dewaal, *Who Will Cry Out Eritrea's War Crimes in Tigray?*, "World Peace Foundation", 23 December 2020, <https://sites.tufts.edu/reinventingpeace/2020/12/23/who-will-call-out-eritreas-war-crimes-in-tigray/> (last accessed on 27 October 2022).

The TPLF has, I believe considerable support both inside and outside the Tigray region. There is however one lesson to draw. The ease with which the Ethiopian government forces pushed the TPLF out of their capital city of Mekelle made it clear that the TPLF grossly underestimated the strength of the Ethiopian and Eritrean forces and exaggerated its own strength to hold its ground as well as to change the political picture of Ethiopia.

Now what was the role of Eritrea in the unfolding and outcome of the armed conflict? Did Prime Minister Abiy choose to bring Eritrea into the Ethiopian sphere by eliminating the TPLF? One can very well argue that Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed should have exerted more effort to diffuse the climate of mistrust that existed between him and TPLF, but it has to be kept in mind that the leaders of Tigray provided Abiy with enough rope to hang themselves.¹⁵

As for the Eritrean President, the issue was very clear. The TPLF was the main obstacle in the normalization of relations with the rest of Ethiopia. In his latest interview which he did with the Eritrean television network on 7 February 2020, Isaias said:

The overriding issue in Ethiopia is whether the country is capable of resolving the crisis of ethnic conflicts unleashed by the TPLF and how Eritrea can support the forces of change taking place in Ethiopia. What happens in Ethiopia affects us so we shall continue to consult with the government of Dr Abiy and participate in what is happening in the country. The border issues, in spite of TPLF's obstacles are not primary.

The problem of ethnicity was the greatest danger and we (Isaias) tried hard to pre-empt it in 1994, since we knew that the Ethiopian constitution would lead to disintegration.

The war against us [he is referring to the 1998–2000 war and to the “no peace nor war” stalemate that lasted until early April 2018] was a consequence of the 1995 constitution. There was no border issue at the time of the war; we never knew the border since those before us had already delimited it. The war was not between Eritrea and Ethiopia; it was between TPLF and Eritrea.

There is only one way to overcome the destructive impact of ethnic politics; One has to change the political heritage of the TPLF. The discourse in Ethiopia is between two choices; it is between ethnicity and unity. The Eritrean position is for a united political ideology.¹⁶

The TPLF leadership (made up of about 150 individuals) left Mekelle on 28 November 2020. Few members of the TPLF leadership were captured, and no one knows how many of those who left Mekelle are killed but so far none of them has left the country. Mekelle is now under the control of the Federal government and is being jointly administered by the Ethiopian army command post and a temporary Administrator for Tigray, Dr Mulu Nega and his cabinet.

Tigray will not be the same again and certainly no one can foresee what the future holds as regards the relations between Eritrea and Ethiopia. However, conditions at present (30 December 2020) appear to be favourable indeed for the construction of new relations with mutual trade-offs: free movement of people and goods (of great

¹⁵ The decision to declare the Abiy government as unlawful (after 10 October 2020) and the refusal to send deputies to the Federal Parliament in Addis Ababa were measures that gave Abiy Ahmed very little leeway to solve the problem peacefully.

¹⁶ I remain responsible for the free translation from Tigrinya to English.

interest for Eritrea) and secure access to the Sea (of equal importance to Ethiopia). This is a solution suggested by Zewde Gaberselassie, Christopher Clapham¹⁷ and hinted at by myself (Negash & Tronvoll, 2000).

My reading of Isaias Afwerki leads me to conclude that solutions such as the above are what he wished to see ever since he came to power in 1991. There are good chances that the peace treaty between Eritrea and Ethiopia of July 2018 would be scaled up. But as the president of Eritrea has pointed out, Ethiopia has to deal with the destructive impact of ethnicity before it could maximize the dividends of its peace treaty with Eritrea.

Postscript. Theoretical and Methodological Considerations

I am fully aware as a historian that I have no business in being engaged in a future studies paper. Imagining or predicting the trajectories of a phenomenon such as the relations between Ethiopia and Eritrea is fraught with many pitfalls. Not only is it difficult to capture the present—an important condition for studying its trajectories, we have no way of knowing what tomorrow might bring with it. Yet taking these rather insurmountable hurdles into account, it is possible, and quite common among historians, to push their analysis into the future.

The paper was submitted towards the end of 2020, whereas this postscript was penned down in August of 2022. A lot of things happened during the last two years; the war between the Ethiopian government and the regional state of Tigray (commonly described as “the war in the north of the country”), continues unabated. The Ethiopian army withdrew from Tigray completely on June 2021 giving two reasons. First to give peace a chance so that peasants could cultivate their lands. The second reason was that the Ethiopian army did not have the support of the Tigrean people. According to the regional army of Tigray, however, the Ethiopian army withdrew because it was defeated. Soon after Ethiopian withdrawal from Tigray, the armed forces of the regional state of Tigray, known as the TPLF army or Tigrean Defence Forces (TDF), burst out of their region and marched towards Addis Ababa until by early December 2021, they were a couple of hundred kilometres north of the capital. Victory appeared so certain that the TPLF formed a coalition of federalist and con-federalist forces to take power in Addis Ababa. Eritrea whose support of Ethiopia was of decisive importance in the beginning of the war (November 2020) and who was determined to crush the Tigrean forces was left on the margins when Ethiopia first withdrew from Tigray and later when it appeared that the central government might succumb under the pressure of TPLF. Eritrea felt abandoned and there was a great fear that it would alone face the TPLF. Military mobilization was intensified and the president

¹⁷ Clapham (2017: 137) concluded that: “in some way, the enduring geopolitical realities in the Horn need to be reconfigured in a form that served the interests of its varied constituencies, and that would enable Eritrea, in particular, to benefit from the use of its Red Sea Ports for trade with the interior, and in the process kick-start its moribund economy by linking it to the dynamic achievements of the Ethiopian developmental state”.

of Eritrea warned his citizens for the inevitable war between Eritrea and Tigray. It has to be recalled that Ethiopian forces appeared incapable of resisting the marching forces of TPLF.

Rather unexpectedly, the TPLF forces stopped marching towards Addis Ababa (in early November 2021, the TPLF forces were 200 kilometres away from the capital) and what has surprised many observers was that they withdrew all their forces and retreated to their region. The Ethiopian army returned to their former positions and stated that they would not pursue the TPLF army once it had left all non-Tigrean areas of Ethiopia. The TPLF forces withdrew back to Tigray leaving behind two important provinces, under the control of the Amhara regional government. The Tigrean forces said that they carried out planned withdrawal in order to give peace a chance. The Ethiopian army had, of course another explanation; it stated that the TPLF was thoroughly defeated. Since the beginning of this year, Tigray and Addis Ababa have declared ceasefire and are searching modalities for a peaceful resolution of the war in the north. With the exception of humanitarian aid (heavily supported by the United States of America Development Aid, USAID), Tigray remains blocked with no access to electricity, banking and telecommunication services.

While many experts would continue to debate on whether the TPLF retreated back to its region on its own volition (that is the position of the TPLF) or whether it was defeated by the Ethiopian forces (that is the position of the Ethiopian government), Eritrea felt that it was left out in the cold. Yet, I believe that Eritrea would continue to pursue a politics of close affinity with Ethiopia unless hitherto unforeseen external events (or contingencies) big enough to change the course of history take place. For instance, a sustained environmental disaster in the form of severe drought or a European recolonization of Eritrea or a disintegration of Ethiopia could each of them or a combination of them indeed bring about a new set of politics different from the one sketched above.

In the process of writing this paper, I have fully relied on Anthony Giddens (1993) theory of structuration. Difficult it might be to explain in few words, the theory of structuration posits that people are both the creators of structures and the products of the structures that they created in the first place. Ever since the early 1990s, the Eritrean government had laid the ground for closer relationship with Ethiopia. History, culture, economy and language were used as building blocks for the construction of close relations between the two countries. The government of Eritrea has never ceased to stress the links that bind the two countries. The official and non-official writing and statements coming from Eritrea, I believe constitute a solid structure—strong enough to shape actions and expectations of Eritrean citizens inside the country. Isaias Afwerki, the current president of Eritrea, would not live forever but the structures he created or his legacy (in the parlance of historians) would outlive him. His successors would continue to follow the structures (a cumulative term for legacies that are transmitted from generation to another) that were set by previous leaders and could only change them without any major break. Indeed structures can be transformed when they are faced with novel and unexpected events. The theory of structuration perceives human action in constant process of production and reproduction that shapes inter-personal and inter-group relations. Today is similar to

yesterday but with slight changes and tomorrow would be greatly similar to today but also with slight changes. Under normal circumstances structuration, theory is similar to what historians call continuity or the dead weight of the past hovering over the present and threatening to dominate future. “Every act which contributes to the reproduction of structure is also an act of production, a novel enterprise and as such may initiate change by altering that structure at the same time as it reproduces it—as the meanings of words change in and through their use” (*ibidem*: 134). “Structures”, writes Anthony Giddens (*ibidem*), “exist out of time and space and have to be treated for purposes of analysis as specifically impersonal”.

Another author who inspired me to try my hand to sketch the trajectory of Eritrean-Ethiopian relations is undoubtedly John Lewis Gaddis. In his lucidly written treatise with a seemingly simple title: *The Landscape of History: How Historians Map the Past*, he put forward case after case where historians can and do forecast or predict because “our focus on human behaviour enables us to address the subtle and complex dimensions of the known and knowable universe” (Gaddis, 2002: 89). “Historians”, wrote Gaddis (*ibidem*: 155), “make the past accessible for the present and the future” by using various methods of data analysis where narrative is the most important. In this paper, I have attempted to give an account of the recent past in order to make it accessible for imagining the foreseeable future. Here I have to admit that I have a bias—a weakness that Gaddis attributed to many historians; it is the bias of making a moral judgement (*ibidem*: 147). My reading of Eritrean-Ethiopian history of the last two decades has privileged facts that emphasize the links between the two countries.

My moral bias aside, the overriding reason for writing the paper is John Gaddis theory of history which I fully share. “Continuities” wrote Gaddis (*ibidem*: 30), “[...] are simply phenomena that recur with sufficient regularity to make themselves apparent to us. Without such patterns, we would have no basis for generalizing about human experience. Trends that have held up several hundred years are not up to reverse themselves within the next several weeks”. Whereas contingencies are phenomena that do not form patterns [...] they do not fall within the realm of repeated and therefore familiar experience: we generally learn about them after they have happened” (*ibidem*: 31).

“Continuities intersect contingencies, contingencies encounter continuities, and through this process history is made” (*ibidem*: 31). So going back to my paper, the pattern that the Eritrean government laid down during the last thirty years (continuity dimension) would be further developed unless unexpected events (contingencies) create conditions for a change of course. I hope I have understood Gaddis correctly in so far of how history is made. In writing this paper, however, I might probably have pushed the reasoning of Gaddis a little more as I worked under the assumption that a great part of the future can be known by a closer reading of the past and an impartial gaze of the present.

A decade from now would undoubtedly prove the usefulness of the theoretical assumptions adopted in writing this paper.

Appendix

Joint Declaration of Peace and Friendship Between Eritrea and Ethiopia¹⁸

Conscious that the peoples of Ethiopia and Eritrea share close bonds of geography, history, culture, language and religion as well fundamental common interest;

Recognizing that over the past decades, they were denied the opportunity to build a bright future for their peoples on the basis of their common heritage;

Determined to close this very costly chapter, which also had a detrimental role in the Horn of Africa, and to make up for lost opportunities and create even bigger golden opportunities for their peoples;

The governments of Ethiopia and Eritrea have reached the following joint agreement which reflects the desires and aspirations of their peoples:-

1. The state of war between Ethiopia and Eritrea has come to an end. A new era of peace and friendship has been opened.
2. The two governments will endeavour to forge intimate political, economic, social, cultural and security cooperation that serves and advances the vital interests of their peoples;
3. Transport, trade and communications links between the two countries will resume; diplomatic ties and activities will restart;
4. The decision on the boundary between the two countries will be implemented.
5. Both countries will jointly endeavour to ensure regional peace, development and cooperation.

Both governments express their gratitude to all friends of Eritrea and Ethiopia and call on them to redouble their solidarity and support.

Done in Asmara, 9 July 2018

For the State of Eritrea For the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia
President Isaias Afewerki Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed.

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Sources and Research on Liberation and Revolutionary Movements in the Horn of Africa



Awet T. Weldemichael

Abstract The last decades of the twentieth century saw the transformative rise and gains of armed revolutionary movements and insurgencies in the Horn of Africa. Just as their feats were difficult, so too is studying them decades after the fact. Besides the movements' continued political relevance and their contested legacies, questions of sources and their accessibility constitute significant obstacles to rigorous scientific research. Notwithstanding, sizeable scholarship developed over the decades and, more recently, a growing number of the participants wrote auto/biographies and memoirs. Coupled with scattered and difficult to access primary sources, these sources of material offer useful—if not complete—picture of those movements and their struggles. This essay reflects on the substantive and methodological challenges and opportunities of studying the insurgencies in the Horn of Africa. More specifically, it offers a survey of the scattered and diverse primary sources and a sketch of the published popular and scholarly literature—with a focus on Eritrea and Ethiopia.

Keywords Eritrean liberation front (ELF) • Eritrean people's liberation front (EPLF) • Tigray people's liberation front (TPLF) • Ethiopian people's revolutionary party (EPRP) • Oromo liberation front (OLF)

Irma Taddia's retirement marks a major development in the history of solidarity with and study of the Horn of Africa. Her relationship with the region is layered and multipronged. Even though, as a socialist and antiracist, she is a familiar friend and ally of progressive, revolutionary movements in the Horn of Africa, her scholarship remained by and large on Italian colonial rule in Eritrea and the Horn. Despite temptations of studying the revolutionary movements of the 1970s and 1980s, Irma stayed clear from it her vast network in Eritrea and many friends in its liberation movement notwithstanding. By doing so, she also avoided having to contend with the challenges of studying this vexed theme and period. Of the many challenges of

A. T. Weldemichael (✉)
Queen's University, Kingston, Canada
e-mail: awet.weldemichael@queensu.ca

researching the nationalist insurgencies in the region, sources and access to them remain topmost.

Whereas the secondary literature, both scholarly and popular, on insurgencies in the Horn of Africa is as varied as the insurgencies themselves, discussions on nationalist movements largely—but not exclusively—concentrate on Eritrea and Ethiopia. This chapter is a meditation on the challenges and opportunities of studying the insurgencies in the Horn of Africa substantively and methodologically, i.e., in terms of sources. It will more specifically survey and examine the scattered and diverse primary sources and consequent methodological diversity and challenges of studying late twentieth-century insurgencies in the Horn of Africa. For two decades between the early 1970s and the early 1990s, Eritrean and Ethiopian revolutionaries of one or another shade of Marxism dominated that arena. This chapter will zero in on Ethiopian insurgents and Eritrean nationalists.

Revolutionary Movements in Ethiopia and Eritrea

Ethiopia's birth as an expansionist empire-state, the narrow ethnic and geographic base of its monarchical rule, and its subsequent repressive military dictatorship turned the country into a hotbed of armed insurgencies. These rebels resisted land dispossession, centralization or tax burdens of an overbearing state or demanded rights—political, ethnic/geographic or religious. The imperial state managed to put down with brute force the 1943 Weyane rebellion in Tigray (Tareke, 1984) and peasant rebellions in Gojjam (1968–1969) (Schwab, 1970) and Bale (1963–1970) (Østebø, 2020). Nevertheless, insurgencies of a different breed shook the imperial government to its roots, battled and ultimately defeated the military government of the junta that overthrew Haile Selassie I.

The Ethiopian insurgencies under consideration were either ideologically motivated anti-feudal and anti-monarchical or were driven by ethnic identity or the nationalities question. Whereas the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP) is an example of the former, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) and the Western Somali Liberation Front (WSLF) constitute some of the latter. The Eritrean case presents yet another angle; in the jagged Ethiopian sociopolitical landscape, the Eritrean case represented yet another dimension, i.e., anticolonial. Eritrean nationalists held that, owing to their country's colonial origins and its illegitimate annexation by Ethiopia, their cause was one of colonial oppression and different from the other grievances in Ethiopia proper. Accordingly, they declared, from the outset, their pursuit of decolonization and independence—or at the very least the right to determine their own future.

When the first two types of insurgents were in the offing toward the mid-1970s, the Eritrean armed war for independence (by the Eritrean Liberation Front or ELF and later the Eritrean People's Liberation Front or EPLF) had been raging for close to a decade and a half. The Ethiopian insurgents, especially the EPRP and the TPLF, sought and received crucial help from the Eritreans, especially the Marxist-leaning

EPLF. But the latter effectively leveraged its advantages toward making its assistance and collaboration contingent upon the Ethiopian insurgents' recognition of *prima facie* uniqueness of Eritrea's case that warranted the right to self-determination and independence.

Through the turbulent decade and a half that followed, these and other insurgencies cooperated and competed. In addition to other endogenous factors, EPRP's wavering on Eritreans' precondition sealed its fate by terminating the support it received from the EPLF. By contrast, TPLF's unwavering stand on the uniqueness of the Eritrean case earned it a strategic alliance with the EPLF, which, despite four years of vitriol and hiatus in their relationship, proved crucial for their joint successes as was the case with the OLF.¹ Closely aligned EPLF in Eritrea, and TPLF in Tigray and the OLF emerged victorious against their rivals and went on to win the war too. In 1991, Eritreans ended Ethiopian rule of their country. At the same time, with Eritrean support, the TPLF (and its coalition of other Ethiopian insurgents) and the OLF dislodged the Derg junta from the rest of Ethiopia. In exclusion of the OLF, the victorious movements then set up ruthless authoritarian regimes in Asmara and Addis Ababa on the altars of their former revolutionary ethos.

During the decades that they stayed in power (the TPLF until 2018, and the EPLF until present), strict control of information, both historical and contemporary, remained a common, salient feature of their respective *modus operandi*. Whereas deafening silence characterized the EPLF method, TPLF included an in-person berating of the researcher as they did to their members.² But the proliferation of alternative spaces (in terms of geographies and venues beyond the control of the states in question) and the advent of novel methods denied the winners the final say on what had transpired, thus rendering the "winners write history" phrase old and trite.

Dangers and Possibilities of Oral Sources/Histories and Auto/Biographies

Where authoritarian regimes jealously guard documentation and data, access to information becomes a privilege granted to a select few—and not a right. In such instances and in cases where the archives are closed or otherwise inaccessible or severely restricted for any reason, the researcher is compelled to heavily rely on oral sources and write oral histories. Methodologically, the use of oral sources and the writing of oral histories are themselves replete with their inherent challenges and challenges that are unique to their respective circumstances.

¹ I discuss these complex dynamics in my other works as do others. See for example (Weldemichael, 2014).

² A not widely known example is a 1990s case of a foreign researcher who published a book on the TPLF whereupon two members of EPLF politburo called him in for a private dressing-down.

To begin with, oral sources are not free from the spell of authoritarian control, often, of the state, but also of the single party in the country. Oral informants are ill at ease to freely share what they experienced and what they know, especially if they fear their information may contradict the official party/government line or the latter may not approve of such storytelling. Moreover, the intimate nature of those experiences and knowledge makes many informants guarded or reserved until they are sure the researcher can be trusted with their life stories and experiences. For oral sources to share and record their experiences more readily, it takes for researchers to prove themselves to be trustworthy conveyors of the oral sources' information and for the latter to appreciate that doing so could serve the common good for which they paid dearly in the first place. That level of awareness—and indeed service—in its turn requires mundane normalcy undisrupted by the exigencies of quotidian life under dire circumstances of war, and by physical and material insecurities that often haunt post-conflict environments.

As if to fill the consequent gap in—and challenges of—oral sources and oral histories, the past few decades saw an encouraging development that renowned historian Joseph Miller (2014) characterized as a “biographical turn.” According to Miller, historians have progressively been shifting away from grand or statistical approaches of historical research-cum-writing, and more toward biographies that center around the individual, their experiences and perceptions. In the case of the Horn of Africa, this biographical turn has loosely taken the form of autobiographies that have flourished in the new millennium. As much as studying insurgencies in the Horn of Africa in general and in Eritrea and Ethiopia, in particular, are plagued by the above inherent challenges and other impediments unique to each one of them; that endeavor is also aided by attendant opportunities such as the growing genre of autobiographies and autobiographical narratives of the insurgencies and counterinsurgencies. But the diversity of languages that these accounts are written in also poses a formidable challenge to researchers, who must either be multi-lingual (preferred for direct access) or rely on translations and translators that not only curtail the directness of access but are also expensive. The following brief survey samples published materials in Amharic, Arabic, English and Tigrigna languages only.

The Eritrean Nationalist Struggle for Independence

Researching the Eritrean independence movement depends on oral and written sources, mostly inside the country but also outside of the country. Inside Eritrea, archival research requires access to the country's Research and Documentation Center (RDC) in the capital, Asmara, where a sizeable collection of written and oral sources are housed. This center is a successor to a similarly named research material repository of the EPLF based in Rome, Italy. After independence, that center's holdings were relocated to Asmara under the care of the newly established RDC that also became custodian of other publicly accessible archives of various origins, i.e., rival organization of the Eritrean liberation movement, some of Imperial Ethiopia's

records, the Derg government's mostly classified military documents, and donated collections by individual Eritreans and non-Eritreans. The last category includes a large cache of primary documents that veteran Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) leader Ibrahim Idris Totil gathered from his ELF former comrades and contacts in North Africa and the Middle East, and he deposited what he retrieved at the RDC in the early 2000s.

While RDC's personnel are hard-working professional archivists and librarians, access to their collection is granted by the ruling party, the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ). Once that permit is secured, visiting RDC's facility is easy as is working on its collection. But not all RDC's holdings are accessible to all. Whereas some, like the still classified Ethiopian military documents, are restricted and require a special permit to access, others are quietly pulled out of public use.

Eritrea still lacks a duly instituted National Library. Nor does it have laws on handling archives and de/classification of documents. In the context of this institutional and legal void, the work of RDC and its archivists remains held hostages to what party and government leaders deem "sensitive." Accordingly, several previously accessible documents were taken away and rendered inaccessible. There are two locations for such documents: (1) an outfitted villa in the Tiravolo neighborhood of Asmara that serves as a makeshift repository of PFDJ's sensitive archives; and (2) the country's Office of the President holds by far the most sensitive materials dating from the years of independence war to the present. This is not to mention the archives that government institutions inherited from the Ethiopian administration and what they produced in the three decades of independence from Ethiopia. Although Eritrean leaders' determination of documents' sensitivity is not transparent, the nature of the inaccessible archives speaks to, *inter alia*, imperatives of regime security, its control of the narrative and sanitizing of its history.

Government control of the citizenry is so pervasive that only a few are willing to be interviewed for historical research that may contradict the official line of the party and government on topics regarded as sensitive. The ruling PFDJ's culture and research branch and RDC researchers have commendably collected vast oral history material by interviewing many participants of the nationalist movement many of whom would otherwise be unwilling or reluctant to be interviewed by individual researchers under the circumstances. Those willing to be interviewed, including founders and leaders of the EPLF, defer responses to critical questions for an opportune future date. "The time for it has not come!" is a phrase any researcher of the Eritrean independence movement has heard on broaching what the respondents consider sensitive or critical topics.

By contrast, there is relative archival openness in Ethiopia where primary data from the previous governments' intelligence about and military operations against the insurgents (in Eritrea as well as Ethiopia proper) are accessible with relative ease. Not only are those documents the most reliable sources on Ethiopian security and military capabilities, operations and outcomes thereof (both negative and positive), but they also shed critical light on the dynamics of the insurgencies and dispositions of the insurgents at various stages. Moreover, many civilian and military officials of the successive Ethiopian governments have written biographies or otherwise given

extensive interviews on topics that cover the insurgencies across the region. The interviews, like other sources of any historical research, are not without their problems, but they offer useful windows into the perceptions and thinking of those actors as well as their factual recollection of events and processes that would otherwise be lost.

Likewise, auto/biographies as a category of historical source material have a varied record of contribution. By and large, however, Ethiopian and Eritrean actors writing political autobiographies have closed important knowledge gaps on insurgencies, generated considerable debates and triggered the curiosity of the wider public about contemporary histories of their communities. Of these, perhaps the earliest is Dawit Wolde Giorgis's (1989) *Red Tears* that offered an account (in the first person) of imperial and Derg governments' actions and inactions toward sociopolitical and environmental challenges the country faced from the early 1960s, when he joined the military, to the 1980s, when he defected. But the most iconic is Colonel Mengistu Hailemariam's (2011) trilogy, *Tiglachin*, that offers a perspective from the frontlines of what happened in Ethiopia and Eritrea during his seventeen-year rule. Of no less significance are his one-time vice president Fisseha Desta's (2014) and one-time prime minister Fikreselassie Wegderes's (2013) detailed and well-written accounts as well as that of several commanders of the Ethiopian armed forces of that era. As leaders of a government that committed widespread, large-scale atrocities and commanders of an army that ultimately lost the war, their narratives have to be taken with a grain of salt. That is especially the case as they variously relegate their defeat to conspiracies of one kind or another, they still advocate the noble intentions of the 1974 revolution that they either led or were a part of, and they advance their individual righteous character. Perhaps one salient exception is Col. Fisseha Desta's bold acceptance, on the inside front cover of his book, of responsibility for what had gone wrong while claiming his share of credit for what he believes they accomplished.

Ranking members of the Ethiopian insurgent groups have also produced highly valuable accounts of their respective movements, offering rigorous re-examination and unique perspectives—if not undisputed. Whereas Andargachew Tiruneh (1993) and Gebru Tareke (2009) offer a rich factual and analytical backdrop to Ethiopia since the 1974 revolution, chronologically, these include Kiflu Tadesse's (1993) yet unmatched history of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP). OLF leader, Leenco Lata (2000), also penned a critical narrative of the post-Derg experiment toward an all-inclusive, democratic transition that had quickly atrophied in the face of TPLF/EPRDF exclusionary pursuit of what came to be known as ethnic federalism—politically buttressed with democratic centralism and enforced with crude force. One of the founders of the TPLF, Aregawi Berhe (2009), similarly wrote a volume of critical scholarship on the origins and internal dynamics of the TPLF within a wider context of political turmoil in Ethiopia. Most recently, another ranking TPLF member, Mulugeta Gebrehiwot Berhe (2020), offered a full retrospect of not only the TPLF but also of the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) coalition that the TPLF led as a rebel movement and as a government. In an ironic twist of fate, Dr. Mulugeta had counseled for "laying the past to rest" on

the eve of the disastrous turn of events in late 2020 under the long, dark shadow of that same history.

By comparison with Ethiopian civilian and military officials, fewer Eritreans inside the country have written auto/biographies and given public interviews that the government and the ruling party silenced for challenging or contradicting the official line. Regardless of whether the intentions of the authors were to confirm or reinforce the official account or not, these purportedly harmless publications were allowed to be published and circulated inside the country. An early example of the above category is Tekie Beyene's (2009) captivating, if incomplete (it stops in the mid-1980s), memoir before and after his joining clandestine EPLF cells within the Ethiopian bureaucracy. The latest of such examples is Ahmed Tahir Badhour's (2018) otherwise commendable autobiography in Arabic and simultaneous Tigrigna translation retelling his experience in the EPLF, of which he was among the senior cadres and intellectuals. Their paucity and their benign positioning (if not towing of the official line) notwithstanding, the few such publications that have come out do offer important microhistories of life within the Eritrean nationalist movement.

Eritreans in exile have also started to write their own experiences unencumbered by self-censorship, state control or fear thereof. However, problematic (methodologically and substantively, Tesfay Temnewo (2013) and Yemane Tekhlegiorgis (2016) (in two parts) narrated their experiences within the EPLF on satellite television and radio stations that broadcast into Eritrea and YouTube channels to generate widespread interest in the history of the armed struggle for independence among young Eritreans the world over. Only then were their narratives published in book form.

Unofficial histories of the Eritrean nationalist movement have also been written by former leaders of rival nationalist organizations. The prolific Osman Saleh Sabbe wrote running commentaries and nationalist histories of Eritrea before his untimely death in 1987.³ By far the most resourceful of publications in this category is Tahir Ibrahim Feddab's (1994) Arabic volume on the first decade of the Eritrean nationalist movement. Tahir was among the earliest leaders of the nationalist movement active in its diplomatic arm, which gave him unique insights into the nationalist movement that is reflected in the pages of that book. His rich analysis is matched by the dossier of rare primary documents (as appendices) that only he could get due to his strategic position in North Africa and the Middle East between the late 1950s and 1960s. A book of comparable weight, albeit lacking appendices of primary documents, is Mohammed Said Nawud's undated *Harakat al-Tahrir Al-Irytriyyah*, on the Eritrean Liberation Movement (that existed between 1958 and 1965). This founder of the ELM published his book in Khartoum, Sudan, and it was received well in Eritrea. Nawud's voluminous account is challenged and enriched by Mohammed-Berhan Hassan's (2001) rejoinder, self-published simultaneously in Tigrigna and Arabic. Whereas Nawud was a founding leader of the ELM in Sudan, Mohammed-Burhan was one of its earliest recruits and leaders on the ground in Eritrea.

³ Sabbe's numerous interviews, commentaries and publications include *Tarikh al-Irytriyya* (Sabbe, 1974).

PFDJ's former Secretary and one of the senior-most leaders of the EPLF, the late Alamin Mohammed Said, can be considered the unofficial historian of the EPLF and PFDJ for his record three book-long accounts of official history of the independence struggle and post-independence Eritrea (Said, 1992, 2002). While classic official narrative, Alamin was a firsthand participant in most of what he recounts in his books, had privileged knowledge of the others, and had access to otherwise inaccessible primary documents. Alamin's books have been published inside the country and remain in circulation except for the poor Tigrigna translation of his earliest book, *Al-De'fe' wa al-Teredi*.

For the unofficial history of the second phase of the Eritrean armed struggle for independence, one must look for Tekeste Fekadu's trilogy. One of the celebrated pioneers of medical services within the EPLF, the field surgeon recounted the grass-roots history of the Eritrean armed struggle in three large volumes offering a sweeping account of the period between 1976 and 1991. Starting in 1976, the first book narrated the insurgents' string of military victories that culminated in their near-complete liberation of the whole country before major setbacks left them hunkered down in a remote northeastern corner of Eritrea (Fekadu, 2002).⁴ The second volume answers how the EPLF survived seemingly insurmountable odds by looking at various aspects of the organization (Fekadu, 2008).⁵ The final piece of the trilogy documented the years leading up to the insurgents' victory and their march into the capital, Asmara (Fekadu, 2015).

By contrast, similar accounts that, nonetheless, contradict the official line are prevented from publication inside the country. A typical example of this is Ibrahim Idris Totil's monograph in Arabic (and a Tigrigna translation) on the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF). Totil was a leader of ELF's political arm before the disintegration of that nationalist organization and his faction's merger with the rival EPLF that won the war and led Eritrea to independence. In spite of his subsequent formal membership of the ruling party, his well-researched and analytical book has been prevented from publication for the past decade and a half and remains an unpublished manuscript exchanging hands among friends and acquaintances.

Totil's military counterpart in the ELF, Abdallah Idris Mohammed (varied spelling) similarly wrote an account of the ELF largely based on his recollections and it was published outside of the country in 2016—five years after his passing in exile (Mohammed, 2016). Even though an English translation is believed to have come out shortly after the original in Arabic, neither have made it into the country and are in limited circulation outside the country. Abdallah, like Alamin for the EPLF, had written an earlier account that critically examined the experience of the ELF. Titled *Erytriyah: Burkan al-Qern al-Afriqi* [Eritrea: the Volcano of the Horn of Africa], this 1986 book has had limited circulation and is little known outside the Arabic-speaking/reading experts of the nationalist movement. Another ELF leader, Ibrahim Mohammed Ali, wrote in Arabic in 2009 on the rise and fall of the ELF, which also appeared in an abridged English translation much later (Ali, 2009).

⁴ The Tigrigna version of this book is *Kab Nakfa nab Nakfa, 1976–1979*.

⁵ The Tigrigna version of this volume came out three years later as (Fekadu, 2011).

Other typical microhistories produced and/or distributed in Eritrea document individual events or experiences, often valorizing the feats of bravery of the individuals in question. Fitsum Tesfamariam's (2001) short narrative documented individual accounts of heroic deeds (in combat) of former students of the EPLF's Revolution School, of whom he was one. Dawit Yohannes's (2012) slim volume is a collection of his personal recollections of disparate true events involving his many comrades in the EPLF military units. Similarly, Yordanos Tekle (2015) wrote her recollections of life during the armed struggle.

Whereas the above three and other similar publications can be seen in a continuum with the regular column, *Kab Mahder Jeganuna* [Tigrigna, lit. "From the Record of our Heroes"], on the national newspapers (in Arabic and Tigrigna) and radio broadcasts (in multiple languages), a few are of a different category. Besides Tekeste Fekadu's trilogy, Alemseged Tesfai's body of work represents a creative-writing angle if not in the mold of Baalu Girma's (1983) iconic *Oromay* certainly no less distinctive. Since the mid-1980s, Alemseged produced numerous pieces of microhistories of the war years through biographies, plays depicting life under Ethiopian-occupied territories versus the liberated zones, and his personal encounters and experiences in battle.⁶

My Experience with Mesfin Hagos's Auto/Biography

It is under this substantively and methodologically variegated background that I had the unique opportunity to collaborate with the celebrated veteran of the Eritrean independence war and former Defense Minister, Mesfin Hagos, in writing his life story. Mesfin joined the ELF in 1967, and shortly afterward traveled to China for a six-month-long training. On returning, he played an important role in organizing fighters who had fled the sectarian violence within the ELF and formed the rival EPLF. Mesfin rose to become EPLF's revered military leader, celebrated for his command of the 1988 blitzkrieg on the Ethiopian military in Afabet and the final 1991 assault on the capital Asmara, culminating in the full liberation of the country. After independence, he served as Chief of staff, Minister of Defense and Regional Governor until 2001.

Following the 1998–2000 conflict with Ethiopia, Mesfin played a critical role in bringing together the other leaders who peacefully challenged President Isaias Afwerki for his abysmal leadership of the country and mismanagement of the war with Ethiopia. Dubbed the G-15, these former liberation movement leaders posed the most viable opposition to the dictatorship before they were summarily picked up and thrown in dungeons in 2001. Mesfin escaped that fate because he was abroad for medical reasons. Prevented from returning to the country, he has since lived in exile. Writing such a person's story inevitably touched on all the sensitive issues and

⁶ Some of these are in (Tesfai 2002), which he translated from the 1997 award-winning Tigrigna original, *Kelte Qene ab Defe'at*.

tragic turns of the nationalist movement, invoking the substantive and methodological challenges and opportunities discussed in this chapter.

Expected to come out in 2023, Mesfin's auto/biography covers vexed topics and periods of the Eritrean insurgency and post-war government. The book is envisaged to honestly and critically reflect on the turns that the Eritrean liberation movement (between 1967 and 1991) and independent government (since 1991) took or missed. I defer to others the judgment of how valuable it is in documenting Eritrean history of the past half-century. The multi-year process of writing the book entailed about five years of in-person and remote, recorded and unrecorded conversations, and poring over previously inaccessible primary documents in Mesfin's possession—and some in mine. Besides the need to get Mesfin over the typical Eritrean nationalist leaders' reluctance to speak about themselves, it took many years to overcome the inherent doubt and possibly even distrust (about and of me) and as many years for me to gather the courage to broach sensitive personal issues and difficult national topics.

Conclusion

These publications do not diminish the significance of archival primary sources that are still inaccessible in Eritrea and those that are relatively more accessible in Ethiopia. Nevertheless, read together and supplemented with the burgeoning scholarly and secondary sources, not only do they close important knowledge gaps but they also paint an impressive picture of the history of armed revolutionary and nationalist insurgencies in the Horn of Africa. Moreover, it is relatively easier to compound these published narratives with in-depth interviews with leaders and regular members of the nationalist organizations residing in the region or overseas. But that too is not without its methodological and substantive hurdles. Besides the generally understandable scruple of oral sources in who to share their histories and experiences with, the consequences of repression at home and fragmentation abroad render treacherous the writing of oral histories from diverse sources.

Rich collections and recollections, such as Mesfin Hagos's, remain scattered around the world where nationalist and revolutionary leaders have passed through, lived or continue to live. In the absence of full access to the rich collections of written primary sources (both in Ethiopia and Eritrea) and the freedom for open and critical reflections of oral sources (mostly in Eritrea, but to some degree also in Ethiopia), researching the history of the insurgencies in Eritrea, Ethiopia and the Horn remains a daunting exercise of chasing sources across the globe and writing the history out of a mosaic of sources and locations. To this, one must add the challenge of the many languages that one must either master or the finances to hire competent translators to make effective use of the rich written and oral sources that are already accessible. We owe it to Irma Taddia and her interminable caring, generously giving back and building on earlier foundation, for us and future researchers on the topic to keep on piecing together the history of the region's troubled past.

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Awet T. Weldemichael Ph.D., LL.M., is Professor and Queen's National Scholar at Queen's University in Canada. He is author of *Third World Colonialism and Strategies of Liberation* (Cambridge 2013), among other books and journal articles